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JUNE, 1950

Two Big Novels

1. **ONE MORE HILL TO HELL**.....*Steve Frazee* 12
The gunlost kid played his last lone hand with sixes that thundered—"I'll see you, gents—but I'll see you in hell!"
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Bill Thurston swore, "I'll match you blood for blood, bullet for bullet—and grave for grave!"

Short Western Fiction

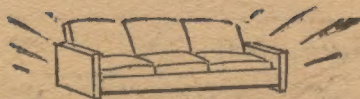
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On The Trail

HUNKER down with us for our regular session on the trail, gents. We're mighty glad to see you again, since we're feeling good about our June drive. Steve Frazee is riding point for us again with *One More Hill To Hell*, which we think is a fine yarn. We'd like to hear what you think of it, so don't be bashful. Let us know, since we're here to give you what you like in Western tales.

As usual our correspondents have been working overtime and riding night herd on pen and typewriter, and so we've got quite some to talk over which you've brought back from the history of the Old West. Let's get right to it and see what made the West tick.

Here's one about a night when hell came visiting:

Dear Editor:

At one hundred degrees longitude, the West begins—that area of our continent where the average annual rainfall is forty

(Continued on page 8)



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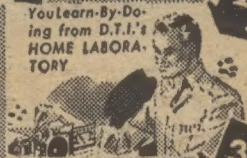
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(Continued from page 6)

inches or less, where the rivers tend to go dry in summer, where the deserts are. One summer—1871—the arid West outdid itself tragically. Your grandfather's pa read of the Chicago Fire—did he ever hear of the more merciless blaze, farther to the West, at Peshtigo, Wisconsin?

It happened on the evening of Sunday, October 8—the last day of the greatest drought on record. One inch of rain had fallen since the First of July. Peshtigo, a town of 2000 persons and about 300 buildings, lay in the heart of the big-lumber country, and was bisected by the Peshtigo River.

It started with a second sunset, after the normal sun had set. This ruddiness was to the south. Before a man could ask his neighbor what it meant, there was a thunderous explosion, caused by natural gas from nearby burning marshes. A hot, sudden twister swept through the town, followed by a second explosion—the terrible noise of Peshtigo itself bursting into flame, as whole houses went up like tinder.

More than half the population, miraculously, survived, but nearly half perished or were to perish in the next ten terrible hours. Everyone naturally made for the Peshtigo River in a panic-stricken, pitiful jumble of humanity. The luckier ones went straight into the river itself. Others, who lived on the east bank and thought only their side was on fire, drove westward over the bridge—while some on the west had the same idea. They met on the bridge, an arc of peril between two perils, and the bridge itself burst into flame. Wagons, horses, and doomed humans went with it.

For those who had gone straight into the water, it was a night of horror. There was no darkness. Above them, the flames made a hellish benison, an endlessness of huge, red fingertips. Sparks fell on them—once, when the woodenware factory erupted, they were showered with its merchandise. From time to time, though they continued to pour water over one another's heads, someone's hair would catch fire. Over all, was the noise—the berserk screaming rage of the giant that wanted them, and meant to get them if the Peshtigo River must be made to boil in the process.

One man, with a fever-stricken wife and five children to care for, had pushed his wife, bed and all, into the slim safety of the water. All night he watched, keeping the sick woman's head pillowed just above drowning level—to rise higher was to burn to death. All night, he counted heads. . . .

Back in the town itself, there had been just one fireproof building, a brick board-inghouse. Fifty people ran into it.

Some others escaped, as they thought, into cleared farmland.

Noise, glare, terror, and then, slowly, the

(Continued on page 10)

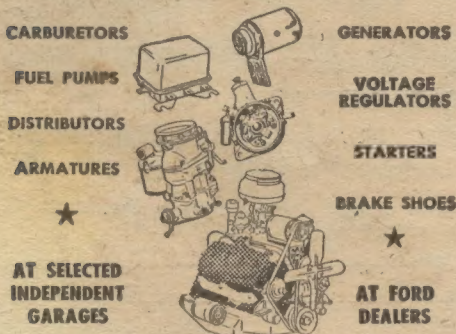


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(Continued from page 8)

dark came back, just before dawn. The fire had passed Peshtigo. Out of the river crawled the numb survivors.

It was Monday morning. A lumber gang foreman, John Mulligan, headed on foot for Marinette, seven miles away, to bring aid. When the rescuers came, they found a completely leveled community, with not a building left—not even the brick boardinghouse, which had stood just long enough to be a crematory for its occupants. Within the black walls was a thick layer of white ash, in which lay two watches. Those who had gone into the clearings had been grilled alive, by the sheer heat.

Six hundred people out of two thousand had died. Little by little, through the afternoon and the stricken forests, the survivors were moved to a Marinette hotel.

On Monday night, twenty-four hours later, the West dropped its desert mood. For the first time in a hundred days, rain came. Over the empty scar of a town, over the leafless timber, it rained and rained. The drought was over.

Harold Schmidt,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Remember the old cry, "Get a horse!" Well, what do you do if you can't get one? Here's what they did about it in frontier days:

Dear Editor:

Some of the greatest athletic feats ever performed on this continent have been accomplished by white men, and inspired by Indians. Well known is the story of the discovery of Yellowstone by John Colter, a mountain man of the Rockies, who ran right into the startling springs with the Blackfeet after him. For years, no one believed that the Yellowstone was anything but a figment of Colter's tortured imagination. And the story of his marathon justified such skepticism.

Captured by the tribe, Colter was stripped, given a slight head start, and then allowed to race for his life with six hundred braves behind him—a kind of human hare and hounds game. He did six miles barefoot over the burning plain before a Blackfoot caught him—but Colter, weaponless, managed to kill his pursuer and continue his hunted way.

It took him seven days, without food, implements, or clothing, to reach the nearest white habitation—but he made it.

Almost as much fun was had by the Shoshone tribe, some thirty years later, when they gave three whites a similar 30-mile sprint through the wilderness of Roberts Creek station, Nevada.

Will Lanier and John Applegate were far from the peak of condition the night they stopped at Cy McCanness' frontier cabin

at Dry Creek station. They were on their way to Virginia City to make their fortunes, if possible, and had already ridden long, hard days and nights. McCanness, a frontiersman, extended them the West's customary hospitality and they were more than glad to accept it.

What neither they nor McCanness realized was that more guests were on their way. Some weeks before, McCanness had married a pretty Shoshone girl, and on the night of Lanier's and Applegate's visit, the far-off Shoshone father-in-law took it into his head to be lonely for his girl and to do something about it.

And so, while the fire died in the hearth, and the three men sat with their whiskey, swapping stories of the plains, a delegation of braves rode in to pay the respects of the bride's father.

A shot rang through the clear air, spooking off the horses. Indians' rifle muzzles peered in through the chinks of the cabin. Mrs. McCanness, recognizing her relatives, screamed at the top of her lungs. McCanness and his guests ran for their horses, and found them gone.

Realizing that while the girl was in no danger from the Shoshones, he and his guests definitely were, McCanness and the two others took off at once for the next white habitation—Roberts Creek station, thirty miles away across the desert.

With the warriors in pursuit, they managed to keep barely ahead for the first mile. Then Applegate, the oldest of the three, knew he was finished. He borrowed Lanier's revolver, before Lanier and McCanness left him, and they heard the shot with which he escaped the Indians at last.

The moon rose and the moon set, and the Shoshone warriors exultantly continued the chase. They could have shot their men down, but that would have spoiled the sport. And the two ahead of them, panting, miserable specimens though they looked, kept their end up nobly.

Dawn came, and the sun rose. The white men, running still, couldn't have been alive any more, not in the usual sense. If they had lived, the Shoshone would have caught them. They were dead and in hell, a hell where they ran and ran from a menace eternally thirty yards behind them. And then the impossible happened. The Roberts Creek station rose on the horizon, and grew larger. One by one, the Shoshones dropped out of the race.

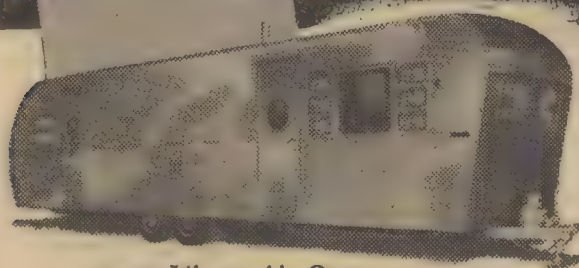
McCanness and Lanier ran into the station yard and safety. They simply dropped. Men carried their unconscious forms indoors, wrapped the ragged flesh of their feet in clean rags, and let them sleep. They slept for fifty hours, and when they awoke, they were living men again.

There is a happy ending to the story. When the Shoshone father heard about the race he shrugged his shoulders, admitted that McCanness might have his points, and

(Continued on page 129)

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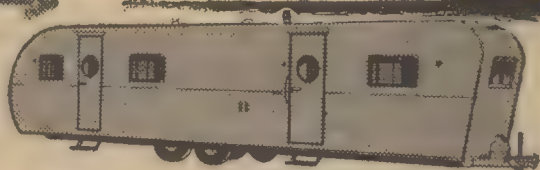
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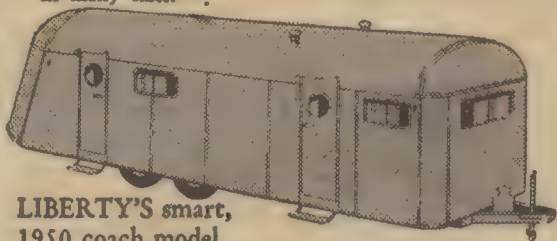
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FRAZEE**



Lost to the living . . . riding with the damned, he played his last lone hand, the gunlost kid with lightning up his sleeve and sixes that thundered—"I'll see you, gents—but I'll see you in hell!"



Sarrett just stood there with the snow coming around him through the open doorway. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Bullet Trail

FROM the top of Gypsum Hill Hallidane was just a smear at the end of rails which had come from somewhere out of the Texas vastness.

Behind his rock, Brett Meredith watched the stage starting up the grade and thought that soon the bigness of the country was going to be mighty handy.

They wouldn't be expecting trouble just a half mile from town, maybe. Not the driver at least, but little Clyde Betters,

riding shotgun today, not only expected but pined for trouble every time he went up on the seat.

The business with Betters would have to be timed to the split second. There was plenty of room to bury a man in this country.

The horses were working hard against the grade, the driver was telling a big lie about the women he'd known in El Paso, and Betters seemed to be drowsing when Meredith sprang from cover and yelled, "Reach, boys!"

The driver locked his wheels, clamped the lines between his knees and reached. Still appearing half asleep Betters flicked his shotgun in line and shot without raising it.

Meredith's timing was right as he dived for cover, but he had no protection against the piece of buck that slammed off a rock and buried itself in the fleshy part of his thigh.

Betters' second barrel took the crown off Meredith's hat as he ducked. It was a flat-crowned hat with a chin thong. He jerked it back in place on his thick thatch of rusty-red hair.

From the rocks on the other side of the stage Jack Sarrett stepped out and called, "Never mind reloading, Betters! And just leave the carbine where it is."

With one hand halfway to a carbine in the boot, Betters straightened slowly, his thin face bitter. "That was the dirtiest trick that was ever pulled on me!" he said.

Sarrett laughed. "Next time we'll show you a really good one. Live and learn, Betters." He said to Meredith, "Get busy while the boys are coming down to stretch their legs. No passengers today."

The leather-covered box under the driver's boards wasn't heavy. The easy-to-carry, Meredith thought happily. Sarrett had been right again. But you couldn't trust these Wells Fargo people too far. He smashed the lock and seal with Betters' carbine.

They hadn't been fooling. The contents was crisp and green.

"Got a new partner now, eh, Sarrett?" Betters said.

"You mean Bill? Oh, sure—"

"Bill, hell!" the driver said.

Sarrett laughed, so easily and with so much good humor that Meredith grinned. "Maybe his name ain't Bill," Sarrett said. "You know how those dodgers are—always getting details wrong." His amused gray eyes watched Meredith a moment. "That's right, Sam, make sure Betters don't have another gun hid out somewhere."

After a while Meredith decided the carbine and the empty shotgun seemed to be the size of things. He threw the carbine as far as he could.

Sarrett pointed upgrade with his six-gun. "Thank you, gentlemen, and good-by!"

They were riding hard for purple hills north of the river when lead sang past and they heard the rifle at the top of Gypsum Hill.

"Told you that Betters was tricky," Sarrett said. "He had a long-gun roped somewhere under the coach. Spread!"

The next shot was short, but Betters had the line all right and the line was right at Meredith. It always seemed to be that way, but this time it was probably because his Mexican sorrel made a better target at a distance than Sarrett's gray. He bent low in the saddle and rode, waiting for the next shot.

Sarrett laughed. He laughed any old time, with sand blowing in his face, when he was hungry, with a gun in his guts. "Over there," he said. "The heroes of Hallidane are spurring to the kill."

Riders drawn by shots were stringing dust from town. Only one went toward the coach; the others cut toward Meredith and Sarrett.

"Lots of fun at one of these riding bees," Sarrett said.

Bettters' third shot made Meredith's horse lunge ahead with a snort. Meredith looked over the leather-covered box under his right arm. The sorrel's rump was bright with blood coming from a streak where the bullet had angled maybe an inch deep.

A minute later they were into a sandy dip and far out of range.

"All right?" Sarrett asked.

"Not good," Meredith said. "Now both me and the sorrel are shot in the rump."

It wasn't really as funny as Sarrett took it.

It wasn't funny at all when the sorrel began to weaken just a little and the riders behind held on.

"Stick to this wash," Sarrett said. "I'll swing to the left and take 'em off your tail. See you at Elfego's place tomorrow night."

Before he put his gray lunging up the bank, Sarrett took the leather box with a casual jerk of his arm.

"Wait a minute! Half of that—"

"Half and the price of a new horse, Brett. Right now you got to ride light. Elfego's tomorrow night. You can find it all right?"

There wasn't time to argue. "I can find it," Meredith said. Later, he heard shots and yells from a long way west, so he knew that Sarrett had gone in close enough to make it interesting.

Meredith reached Elfego's place just after sundown the day after Gypsum Hill. On the edge of the brush, the sprawling collection of weathered *adobe* seemed at the moment to be inhabited only by naked children, goats and chickens. There was an excuse for a corral straddling a little stream. Meredith knew Elfego had other corrals somewhere back in the tangled *brasada*.

A brown lad about fourteen, silver spurs on his bare feet, tremendous buck teeth in his mouth and lots of *sabe* in his

liquid eyes, took the Mexican sorrel, glanced at the crusted edges of the wound where vicious flies had gathered, and went toward the brush after nodding toward the largest building.

The buckshot wound felt worse when Meredith started to walk than it had when he was riding. He'd had one canteen of water since yesterday, and he'd used most of it to sponge the sorrel's mouth and nostrils. The sun had burned through the top of his riddled hat and got to his skull in spite of his thick hair. He took the hat off and rubbed a dusty sleeve against his forehead.

There was a hundred-dollar note under the band of that hat. Sarrett had one just like it. It was only common sense, Sarrett always said, to carry a little reserve and never spend it. That way you were never broke.

There would be plenty of notes to carry as soon as Sarrett got here. They could rest their horses until morning and then ride on.

Damn the sun and damn his thirst, Meredith thought as he shook his head to clear it. He stepped over crawling children and dusty hens and went into the largest *adobe*.

ELFEGO was eating goat stew by himself at a table in the middle of the sprinkled floor. He was naked to the waist, but he had his peaked straw hat on, with the greasy bangs of his curly hair shining darkly against sweat. "*Señor!*" he exclaimed, and pointed to a chair, and went right on eating goat stew.

Meredith had a glass of wine that didn't help his thirst at all. Elfego saw. His big innocent eyes were seeing much. He yelled in Spanish and spewed fragments of peppery stew halfway across the table. An old woman came in with a jug of warm water. About half of it and Meredith thought he felt a little better, even if it

didn't take the sun out of his head. He ate some of the goat stew and had to drink the rest of the water quickly.

"And now," Elfego said some time later, raking delicately between large teeth with a bowie knife that had crusted blood and goat hair against the hilt, "you have come to visit my poor house. Welcome, *Señor!*"

"How much?" Meredith asked. Sarrett always waited to the end and then paid twice as much as if he'd bargained in the beginning. "I'll want a lead horse, too—and not one of those scrubs that go blind as soon as they're led out of the brush."

"Money, *Señor?* Money?" Elfego picked his teeth with one hand and spread the other as if the subject was very boring. "Later, *Señor*. I see you do not sit well, on the one side only. A little accident, perhaps?"

"Nothing." The chunk of buck was paining like the devil and his whole thigh was sore.

From the next building came deep laughter, the musical laughter of Mexican girls, and the squeals of children that had been amused by something. Sarrett was probably here already, Meredith thought. People laughed like that when he was around. Even with the detour he had taken, he should have been here first. The long-legged gray was a ground-comber.

"Jack Sarrett over there?" Meredith inclined his head.

Elfego sucked his lips. "Sarrett? Sarrett? Names, *Señor*, they are nothing at Elfego's."

"A gray horse, no silver on the saddle. A big man with hair like yours. He laughs so that you would not forget." What was the use of talking? Meredith would see for himself. He started to rise.

"That one?" Something quick and thoughtful ran in Elfego's eyes. "No, he is not here." The thought ran on after his words stopped.

"He will be, tonight."

"Perhaps," Elfego said. He ticked the point of his knife up and down against the table. "Now we will talk about money, *Señor*."

Meredith didn't like the quick change, the insinuation. Where did this stack of lard get the right to hint that Sarrett wouldn't make the rendezvous? "Tonight will be soon enough," he said.

"Now, perhaps?" Elfego said politely.

Meredith's chair was clear of the table. He had room to move and he was already leaning a little sidewise to keep weight off his wound. He lifted his right hand off the chair arm. "Tonight, I said."

Elfego shrugged. "Tonight. The house of Elfego is peaceful. We are simple people here."

And so was anyone who trusted Elfego, Meredith thought. He took a drink of wine and tried to blink away his dizziness.

Elfego cut the piece of buckshot out that night, using his all-purpose knife. Of course he was not skilled, but he was quick and not afraid of cutting.

"Would you like to keep the lead, *Señor?*" he asked. "It is not a great piece, but—"

"Hell, no!" Meredith said, and grunted when Elfego poured *tequila* into the gash.

Lying on his stomach on a low, flat roof, Meredith watched the moon come up large. It lay clearness on the trail coming up from gray plains that stretched and ran forever into the night. Liquid Spanish and soft music flowed gently, murmuring to the dusk. The complaints of sleepy children finally died away.

Deep laughter mingled with the sounds of women's voices. There were several women here, and few were old. "My wife's cousins, I think," Elfego had said. "So many children, people . . . one cannot remember everything."

Meredith had seen the men too, long-riders like himself. Sarrett was not among them.

When the wash of moonlight began to die still Sarrett had not come. Meredith drowsed uneasily there on the roof, with his gun beside him. The night was cool but he was hot. Nothing moved on the trail he watched. Toward dawn Elfego's place was quiet. The roof was cold then.

Sarrett had not come. He might have got hit drawing the pursuers off, Meredith thought; or he might have been forced to lay low somewhere else. He would be here.

Elfego woke him when the light was gray. The Mexican was standing below, at the end of the building, with the strong smell of him drifting up. From near the brush came the sounds of footsteps and a soft curse as men moved away into the thickets.

Meredith's hat was right where he had left it, with his arm across it.

"You will ride now," Elfego said. "The sheriff comes from Hallidane with men."

Meredith came down from the roof. He was burning with fever and shaking at the same time. "I'll wait for Sarrett."

"*Si, si!* But not at my poor *jacal*. If you stay you must wait in the Pit."

Meredith had heard of the Pit, a hole scooped out somewhere back in the brush. It was said that two wounded men hidden there by Elfego had been torn to pieces by *javelinas*.

"Not the Pit."

Elfego kept glancing into the grayness. "If you cannot ride, there is no other place. The sheriff sometimes leaves men here for three days. Like pigs they eat. It is a small price I must pay—"

"I want a lead horse, a good one. The sorrel will be stiff for a while—"

"You have money?"

"Damn you, no! But later—"

"I could trade for the sorrel, but . . . ah, the poor horse! So badly wounded—"

"The hell it is! In a week's time—"

"The horse may die soon." Elfego sighed. "But I am a generous man. I,

Elfego, will trade my best mare for this poor dying sorrel only because—"

The noise of distant hooves came from the trail that led toward the plains.

"The sorrel and fifty dollars," Elfego said.

"I'll stay and fight it out with the sheriff," Meredith said. The way he felt he didn't care.

Elfego groaned. "My best mare gone for a crippled horse. This is what happens when a poor man—"

"Move!" Meredith ordered.

They did not go all the way to the corral. In a small open space a few hundred feet back in the brush the same bucktoothed boy who had led the sorrel away was waiting with a saddled mare, a potbellied *sabino*.

"My poor Conchita, my lovely horse, I grieve . . ." Elfego put his arms around the mare's neck and she staggered.

It was the worst kind of robbery. Meredith's gun came out. "We'll go to the corral," he said.

From the houses a deep voice ran out over the thickets. "Tom! Take two men in to check the corrals. They'll be moved again, but have a look."

Time had run out. Meredith swung up on the *sabino* and the animal sighed at the weight.

"Go north, *Señor*," Elfego said. "Go with God."

"Go to hell!" Meredith said, and rode off in a warped saddle on a rack of bones. The bucktoothed lad had already slipped away to take the sorrel where no posse would find it.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell in The Brush

THE pink mare had dropped somewhere from old age and exhaustion, and Meredith was stumbling through *agrito*, trying to curse, his body

a world of fever and weariness, when he remembered one bright thing from the whole mess—the hundred-dollar note. Catclaw raked his back as he slumped down to have a look. His hands were big and fumbly, unusually slow for *his* hands. His clothes were torn. His eyes were red hot and sheets of grayness kept rushing across his vision.

It was a long time before he knew he didn't have the note. Gone with everything else, stolen when he lay asleep on Elfego's roof so long ago.

He stumbled on, with thorns ripping and sticking in flesh where other thorns had already ripped and stuck. There was only one way, just cover your face with your arms and bull ahead. He fell and tasted blood on his arms where flies were working. His gun was a terrible weight, but he wouldn't drop it. He didn't dare drop it.

Where ghost-gray trees stood gaunt around a blinding open place he fell and crawled, and then he could not crawl any more.

Elfego was stealing his gun, the last thing he had of any value. Meredith tried to fight him off, but he couldn't talk and he couldn't see. And suddenly it was all over.

He woke up four days later. He saw pecan ceiling beams above him and through a low window set in stone the blunt rise and fall of the *brasada* with the setting sun on it.

"Well, stranger, I thought you were young and tough."

There was an old man in the low-ceilinged room, a stringy old cuss with bright brown eyes that moved as quickly as a road-runner. Maybe he wasn't so old, at that, Meredith decided after he had a better look. It was just that the mark of the brush was on him, the same lean, tough, weather look that grows on a brushpopping steer.

"Picked you up in the salt bed on my

way from town," the old boy said. "Have a drink of this." It was *huisache* tea, and Meredith was to drink a lot of it before he could defend himself.

"Town?" he asked.

"Mesa Vaca."

That was a long way from Hallidane, at least. Meredith closed his eyes again. Later that evening the old man fed him some wild *chiltipiquines*. "Best thing in the world for fever, or anything else. You had a bad time son, even after I got you here."

Meredith knew that when he tried to get up the next day and couldn't make it.

He stayed almost a month with old Andy McRae. At first he thought any man who would live alone in this place was crazy—ticks and heat and thickets all around, and wild bulls that bellowed in the evening at the waterhole below the stone house. McRae owned two thousand acres of brush and he didn't know how many steers, nor was it likely that all the riders in Texas could ever have choused them out to tally.

Later, Meredith decided that the place wasn't too bad. It was cool sometimes in the evening. If a man got to know the brush . . . well, maybe after you got as old as McRae it might be all right.

"I'll be drifting in a day or two, Andy," he said one night. He had to find Sarrett, who would be looking for him, too, get his share of the loot from Gypsum Hill—and then he'd try to pay old Andy for what he'd done.

"Sure, son." Andy sucked his pipe and nodded. Then he got up and took a piece of paper from a cupboard. As dodgers go, it was a good picture of Meredith and Sarrett standing together at a hitchrack before a Comanche Wells saloon. Sarrett had been laughing at the way the traveling photographer went under his dusty black cloth. The dodger said Sarrett was worth three hundred dollars more than Meredith.

"Quite a boy, that Sarrett," McRae said. "The day after him and—somebody—outfoxed Clyde Betters at Gypsum Hill, Sarrett took a stage west of Comanche for thirteen thou—"

"West of Comanche!" Meredith stared into McRae's live brown eyes. That meant that Sarrett had ridden like the very devil to get there the day after Gypsum Hill.

"It was a well planned business," McRae said, and went on to describe it.

After a few moments Meredith wasn't listening. That second robbery had been set up at least a week in advance, from what McRae said. Sarrett never had intended to go to Elfego's. '*Right now you got to ride light,*' he'd said when he took the money. Sure, he'd led the posse away from Meredith, but he'd had to cross their route anyway to get where he'd been headed all the time.

Anger thumped and churned in Meredith. There wasn't a ten-year-old kid in Texas half as simple as he'd been. Elfego had known all the time after Sarrett's name was mentioned. Sitting there belching at his table he'd been able to guess the truth in a second. Meredith thought of the hours he'd spent lying on the roof, watching, waiting, afraid that Sarrett had run into hard luck.

And then on top of everything, Elfego had pulled his whizzer. But Sarrett was the cause of it all.

"Got it all figured out?" McRae asked.

"Including the killing."

"Big order, of course," McRae said mildly. "The last the Rangers heard of Sarrett he'd crossed into Oklahoma. They got the man that took the big chance on the job west of Comanche. Got him the hard way."

"Naturally they got him," Meredith said bitterly. "Can you trust me for a saddle and horse?"

"We can fix up something. I been trading around a little while you were learning to walk—" He stopped when he saw how

Meredith resented a glance at his thigh.

The next day he took Meredith back into the brush a piece. McRae, also, had a corral not too close to his house. In it was Meredith's Mexican sorrel, and under a tarp in a shed was Meredith's saddle and bridle. McRae looked embarrassed. "I know Elfego pretty well, know how to straighten him out now and then. I—well—there's your damned stuff, kid. The sorrel's good as ever now."

WHAT Elfego had done to Meredith didn't seem so important now. Greed walks with any man.

But Sarrett—he had made a damned fool of a friend. '*You got to ride light,*' he'd said, and he'd been laughing to himself.

"You know," McRae said, "I'd just forget about Sarrett. Say you were lucky enough to catch him and fast enough to blast him—it wouldn't do you any good. He'd go out laughing at you. That's the way he's made."

"You know him?"

"He's stopped here. I never seen a man I liked as much and trusted as little as Jack Sarrett. Take that business of carrying a hundred-dollar bill in his hat. He never did in his life. He spends money so fast it never even gets into his pockets, let alone his hat. But he's talked plenty of suckers into carrying a big bill in their hats, just so's he or somebody else could steal it."

Meredith was glad McRae was looking into the catclaw at the moment.

"No," McRae said, "killing him wouldn't give a man much satisfaction—and it would be a big order too."

"Every wolf has its bullet."

"I wouldn't bother with him, son."

"Thanks—for advice I don't need."

"I didn't either, when I was your age," McRae said. "Going after him ain't a question of what it's going to do to him; it's a question of what it's going to do to you."

Meredith didn't understand and he didn't care to. He said, "I'll take care of myself."

Before he crossed the Brazos he was doubly sure his way was best. A long day's ride always pained him—the results of Better's shotgun, Elfego's filthy knife, and Sarrett's doublecross were concentrated in one place. While no man watching him ride could have guessed he pained, whenever Meredith went up in the saddle he was reminded that he must seek vengeance.

It was worse than mangled ears that showed a gunslinger had made a fool of you. You could wear your ears down the street in plain sight and let your eyes dare any man to look too long or make a crack.

In Fort Worth he knocked a saddlemaker off the walk when the man, after watching Meredith get stiffly from his horse, suggested that the saddle didn't fit him.

He crossed the Big Red and at a small tent town on Little Red got his first news of Sarrett. Crooked land speculators had worked railroad talk to a frenzy and had reaped a fine harvest selling lots the month before. And then the assistant to the chief surveyor of the railroad arrived, got chummy with the speculators, and for an undisclosed sum tipped them off to exactly where the railroad was going to run.

The speculators rushed south to the promised land and bought up the farms of two startled farmers who had just about starved out. There were even a few survey stakes around to sustain the wild buying. Immediately the assistant to the chief surveyor, a big, curly-haired man who laughed a lot and spent money freely, went away to get his parties organized and working full swing.

It was some time before the speculators learned that they had cornered land in a country where no railroad ever would run.

"You'd'a laughed yourself sick to hear

them sharks howl," a bartender told Meredith. "Can't say that I can blame 'em for being took in, either. This Meredith was a man I'd'a trusted—"

"Who?"

"Brett Meredith, the fellow as said he was the surveyor. Looked like a Longhorn to me."

"Yeah," Meredith said, and drank his whiskey at a gulp, sand and all. "Yeah, I guess I would have laughed myself sick. I wonder where this—Meredith—went from here?"

"Nobody knows." The bartender blew some of the sand off a dirty glass and set it on the plank bar. "But a man like that will be heard from again, I'll bet."

Meredith didn't know which way to go. He sort of favored Texas, figuring that by now Sarrett had slipped back. Rangers wouldn't worry him too much. They never had.

The twenty dollars McRae had given him had taken him a long way, but he was flat now. Buzzer, the Mexican sorrel, had to eat and so did Brett Meredith. He took a dry, empty stomach a long way to where he'd heard of a trail drive. Tol Carruthers, the topscrew, looked him over and said he didn't need any hands. "That is, unless—" the drover boss shook his head doubtfully—"you wanted to take the wagon. The cook's rheumatics put him flat two weeks ago on the other side of the Red. It was mainly just not wanting to leave Texas, I think."

"I'll take it," Meredith said, and that was another disgrace to score against Sarrett, who was somewhere fat as a feeder steer and laughing his head off. "Where in Kansas?"

"To the Platte—that's up in Nebraska." Carruthers looked at the way Meredith wore his gun. "Never been out of Texas before, huh?"

"That," said Meredith, "is none of your damned business."

"You sound like a cook already," the

foreman said. "Camp in an hour. We're going to be mighty hungry."

Meredith was mighty hungry at the moment. It was probably colder than Alaska up in Nebraska, but it might be as good a place as any to look for Sarrett.

By the time he'd crossed Kansas he had almost learned to cook. He took a lot of ragging, not all good-natured, about his efforts. He took nothing the morning he rolled from under the wagon with his hip hurting from a night in blankets soaked by rain that had washed against him.

"Got lead in your pants this morning, Gimpy?" Hod Oliver asked.

Meredith took off his apron. His cedar-handled Colt was where he always wore it, even while cooking. He faced Oliver and the rest eating around the fire. "What was that you asked?"

They looked at his blocky face and his narrowed eyes. Oliver had trouble swallowing a mouthful of flapjacks. "No of-

fense, Cookie," he said. "I pass the hand."

For Texans, they were even careful in the remarks they made about his cooking after that.

Meredith was surprised to find no snow in Nebraska in early September. In fact, he thought it hotter there than in many parts of Texas. Folks in the little railroad town where the drive ended were laughing about something that had happened over at Ryepatch that summer. A saloonman there had paid eight dollars a head for a thousand steers, received a bill of sale and taken a couple of drinks when the seller set up the house to celebrate the deal.

The only hitch was that the cattle, bedded down just a quarter of a mile away, had not belonged to the seller.

"What did the fellow look like?" Meredith asked a bartender.

"Like the man who owned the herd. He rode right over from the drive while

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the others was getting the steers bedded down, only it turns out later that he'd been riding with 'em only a few miles. Well, anyone sucker enough to think he could buy at eight dollars a head. . . ."

Meredith drew half his pay. He told Carruthers to send the rest to a man named Andy McRae at Mesa Vaca when the Texans got as close as they would go to the place.

Carruthers said, "It gets mighty cold up here, I've heard."

"I can stand it if he can."

Carruthers didn't ask who. He said, "I thought it was like that. See you in Texas, kid."

CHAPTER THREE

Sign of The Devil

THE saloonkeeper in Ryepatch was very sour about the ranicaboo he'd stepped into, but he had to justify his error. "This Clyde Betters had the marks of the long haul all over him. He was dry, too." The saloonman shook his hand at Meredith. "A man comes in here with a herd bawling and kicking dust so close I could have hit 'em with an empty bottle. He says he owns that herd and wants to do business before he gets so drunk he ain't responsible. These yahoos around here are laughing now, but not one of them that was here at the time and drunk the whiskey this Betters set up to 'em thought he was anything but what—"

"A big black-haired man, laughed with his eyes so you had to laugh with him, gray eyes?"

"That's him!" The saloonman added darkly, "A friend of yours?"

"No friend of mine."

"I'll stand a drink on that. I need one every time I think about him."

"Any idea which way this—Betters—went?"

The saloonman grunted and gave that question the silence it deserved.

Meredith sat into a stud game. He needed enough money to finance his search for a while without having to be slowed down by working. In a half hour he was broke. There wasn't much to being honest, he thought. He got his horse and ground-hitched it at the side of the bank. They were shoveling around a lot of money in there. Just a couple of pocketsful out of the teller's window near the door would be all he needed.

He rolled a cigarette and waited for customers to clear out of the bank. People scuffling through the dust didn't pay much attention to him until a little man with eyes like Clyde Betters' walked up and stuck a gun in his back. Suspicious people here in Nebraska, Meredith thought. He hadn't even robbed the bank yet.

Across the street another man with a badge stepped out from between two buildings. He had a rifle.

The marshal behind Meredith said, "You seen that sign that says Texans don't carry guns in Ryepatch?"

"No," Meredith lied, and breathed easier.

"Too bad," the marshal said.

The marshal wasn't downright mean. After Meredith got out of jail sometime later he helped the Texan find a job on a ranch forty miles west on the river. It was the worst winter Meredith ever put in. The longhorns drifted into fence corners, piled up and froze, and Meredith almost did, in spite of shotgun chaps, a woman's shawl under his hat and—worst of all—bulky overshoes on top of his boots. His wound ached something fierce every time he got into a frosty saddle. Buzzer didn't like the winter either.

O Lord! What an awful score there was against Jack Sarrett.

Sometimes in spite of himself Meredith jerked open the door of the miserable sod hut they called a line shanty in this north

country and stared into blizzards to see if he really had heard Sarrett laughing out there. But he knew Jack Sarrett had not been trapped in the cold, not him. He was in some warm *cantina*, far away from air that struck like a knife.

Spring came at last and there wasn't a bluebonnet in sight, just sand and dirty brown grass.

In Ryepatch Meredith got half of his winter's wages changed into one note. He gave a milliner a dollar to put some oiled silk around it and sew it under the sweatband of his hat. He'd break into that hundred dollars to celebrate right after he gunned Jack Sarrett kicking.

Here and there on his way toward the Red, Meredith saw *Wanted* sheets with the same picture McRae had shown him in the *brasada*. He was glad that he'd only trimmed the beard he'd grown for warmth that winter in the snow.

Down in the southern hills of Oklahoma, where people said the winter had been mild, a big, popular, laughing man named Starr had run a saloon for a few weeks until, tiring of it, he had given it to the bartender and ridden away singing. The women in the town, married and unmarried, had thought well of Starr, even if he had been a saloonkeeper.

Not far across the Texas line Meredith made up to a dancehall woman to see if he couldn't get some news of Sarrett. She didn't know or wouldn't talk about the man, but she did warm up to Meredith enough to warn him that two tough deputy sheriffs were just about to snap up a red-headed man who owned a Mexican sorrel.

It was close. Buzzer split a lot of Texas air before Meredith got back across the line. He got to figuring that if he, who hadn't owned much of a record at all before he joined up with Sarrett, could attract so much law-dog lead, Sarrett would be good for much more. The laughing man was no fool in spite of his arrogant carelessness.

He was probably letting crime in Texas limp along without him.

Out in western Oklahoma Meredith heard about the stage that had been robbed in a gully east of Red Feather that spring. At dusk one evening the stage had come against large rocks piled across the road where a sign burned into a wagon board said: **BRIDGE BUSTED.**

The guard, driver and passengers argued about the sign and the bridge half a mile away. In the end the driver followed a promising detour because it showed fresh marks of several wagons. The stage was robbed of fifteen thousand dollars after it was hopelessly stuck in a gully. Not one got a good look at the man in the dark, but everyone heard him laugh as he gave orders to four confederates stationed with rifles along the sides of the trap. Some passengers said seven confederates.

Daylight showed the tracks of only one horse—and three piles of brush that had been set against the skyline to look like men with rifles. Daylight also showed a broken-down wagon that had been run many times over the false detour, making it look well traveled.

Sarrett must have really laughed about that one, Meredith thought grimly. He was beginning to worry about Sarrett a little. The man would make a mistake and get killed.

Reliable information from people who were authorities on the Red Feather job indicated seven directions in which Meredith's man had gone.

A cowboy with a rusty-red thatch of hair, a short beard and a look in his eye came into Granada, Colorado, that fall on a Mexican sorrel with a gray scar welt on its rump. He watched other cowboys welcome in a train by trying to shoot the headlight out, and learned that Curly Elfego, a laughing man from Oklahoma, had introduced the pastime one day when things were dull.

IT WAS also in Granada, when two saloonmen were warring verbally, threatening to blow each other's places sky-high, that someone rolled an immense, spitting bomb into the Plains Palace one night. Windows and closed doors and other fragile barriers that impeded egress went out with the crowd, and soon the place was deserted except for a dancehall girl who had been knocked under a table and who was too scared to move but scared enough to remember a prayer.

The bomb made a lot of smoke that fogged the interior. The dancehall girl, between prayers, watched Curly Elfego moving unhurriedly but efficiently as he raked into a gunnysack abandoned money from the cashier's doghouse and the bar tills. Later, the girl forgot her praying and used other language that came more naturally. She threw a pail of beer on the bomb, which turned out to be a large, black-painted wooden ball with a burned-out fuse.

Again, Meredith had his choice of many directions. He was a month behind.

The man who stopped beside Meredith in front of the Queen one night had all the looks of a smoky trail behind him, a tight mouth, wary eyes and a face that was not easy to read.

"Looking for a man?" he asked.

"I didn't say so."

"No, but for two days you've sure swiveled your ears like a deer when a certain name was mentioned."

Meredith's face and eyes were hard.

"I figured I was about two thousand ahead when Curly Elfego rolled that phony bomb into the Palace," the man said. "Only time I ever win in my whole life. I picked up my chips, but by the time I got out I'd been shoved and tromped so much I didn't have a single counter left."

"Too bad."

"Yeah, only I mean it. This Curly—I heard him tell a woman he was on his way

to Juarez. Had a deal there. Said he could pass as a Mex when he wanted to."

"I didn't ask about Curly Elfego," Meredith said. He thought he knew a blazer when he heard one.

"You sure didn't," the man said, and started away.

"Who was the woman?" Meredith asked.

"Pearl. The only good looking one at the Queen."

She was that, all right. Meredith already had tried to pump her about Sarrett, and got nowhere at all. Women were like that after Jack Sarrett had passed through their lives. This time he didn't rush things. Down on the Pecos nobody had called him an open-mouthed jinglebob around women from the time he was sixteen.

He sold the lead horse he'd picked up on his way across Kansas and spent almost all the money on Pearl. He had three fights before a few hardheads admitted he was the fair-haired boy for the moment. She liked him too, he decided. She even told him the giveaway signs of a blackjack dealer in the Queen, so he was able to make several minor killings and buy the lead horse back. Pearl talked him into shaving his beard, and he didn't mind that either, because he was a long way from the last dodger he'd seen with his picture on it.

But he couldn't waste too much time. One night he asked, "I wonder where old Curly ever went from here?"

Pearl stiffened just a little, and then she got a sort of dreamy look in her eye, like a lot of women who had known Sarrett.

"I guess he drifted back to Nebraska, probably," Meredith said.

"I suppose. He said he always liked it there."

Meredith knew he wasn't going to get anyplace playing the edges. Pearl was pretty fond of him in her way, and she couldn't know who he was; so he jumped

right into the middle. "Did he ever mention going to Juarez?"

If he hadn't been watching so closely he never would have seen the flick of caution in her eyes or her split-second hesitation. "No," she said. "He mentioned going lots of places, but I'm sure Juarez wasn't one of them."

It was good enough for Meredith. He rode south that afternoon with enough money to see him through. No one in Raton was very communicative, but finally a stable hostler admitted that a big, laughing man with curly black hair had been there the month before.

In Las Vegas, Meredith had to go into Old Town and take his chances before he found a loafer who had seen Sarrett only three weeks before. Because if offered a large field for Sarrett's talent, Albuquerque was probably the man's next stop, Meredith reasoned. So he cut southwest instead to see if he couldn't pick up time.

He had a rough two weeks on Chupadera Mesa, got lost, nearly died of thirst, took an Apache arrow in the arm, and lost his lead horse. But nothing could stop him now. Even Buzzer, gaunt and weary, seemed to know that at last they were closing.

Meredith reached Lava Butte. He was thin, grim and dried out like old leather. No one in Lava Butte admitted they had seen his man.

The sheriff at Las Cruces, almost to the border, sized Meredith up keenly during his first half hour in town. He looked at the sorrel and seemed satisfied.

"You're Brett Meredith, ain't you?" he asked.

Meredith nodded, his mind and muscles ready. He'd never shot a badge-toter yet, but nobody was going to stop him.

"Got a message for you," the sheriff said. "C'mon."

Meredith went warily. The officer took



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a dirty piece of paper from a desk drawer and handed it over.

"BRIDGE OUT" it read, "but since you've gone that far, why not visit Juarez anyway?" It was signed, *Jack*.

"Mex riding through give it to me last week," the lawman said.

For a while Meredith wouldn't believe what he knew was sure. All he could think of was about the Apaches that had almost got him, of days without water—and of how Sarrett must be laughing. He choked as he asked, "This Mex—what did he look like?"

"Maybe fifty, go 'bout a hundred and ten, spoke fair English—" He watched Meredith sink into a chair. "Too much sun, maybe?"

Meredith was sick all right. It had been a typical Sarrett trick from scratch. That tight-mouthed man in Granada couldn't have made it stick alone . . . but Pearl . . . she'd cinched it with just a tiny bit of acting. And those people he thought he'd so cleverly searched out along the way—they'd been paid off by the little Mexican to keep Meredith going. Sarrett was laughing himself sick.

The sheriff, of course, didn't understand, but he was sympathetic. "Lots of officers have missed by closer than you, son."

Being called a lawman piled on more than Meredith thought he could bear. He staggered outside where the hot strike of the afternoon sun reminded him again of what he'd been through.

"Better rest up," the sheriff said. "You're fearful gaunted. What's the matter there with your rear? You keep a-rubbing—"

"I got it caught in a bear trap!" Meredith said savagely. "When I was poking into other folk's business!"

He left without filling his canteens, but after a few miles he realized he wasn't going to get back to Granada at that pace.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ride Wild

IT TOOK him five months to get back. He had to work where he could, once on a railroad carrying green ties with Mexican laborers. He never thought of spending the hundred in his hat, a different hat now. That money was still for celebrating right after his wolf had caught its bullet.

Long ago he had ruled against using his guns for easy passage. Three weeks in the Ryepatch jail had taught him how bad it would be if he slipped on a job and was put away somewhere to reflect for years on a mission unfulfilled.

Pearl was still at the Queen when Meredith rode into Granada one bitter day with the wind whipping dust and dry snow against his ragged clothes.

Her face got a little pale, but her eyes were unafraid. She shrugged away a tall cowboy, who stepped a little farther aside when he saw Meredith's face. She led Meredith to her room to talk, and they did not speak a word on the way. He'd never beaten a woman the way he was going to beat her. He'd slapped down wildcats in *cantinas* when they tried to knife him, but this had to be better than a casual wallop.

"You might have found him if I hadn't helped send you down there," she said, so matter-of-factly that he was stopped for a moment. "I don't know what it is that sends you after Jack Sarrett, but I know it can't be worth it to you. It's made you so bitter you aren't young."

"You helped age me." He'd spent his twenty-third birthday on Chupadera, beside a dead horse, with Apaches trying to work in to finish him. "You helped do that! You lied to me right!"

"I lied, of course, but not for money like the rest. The twelve days I knew Jack Sarrett meant something to me that you

couldn't understand. I was never so happy and laughed so much in my life—and I knew all the time he'd ride away when he wanted to. And if I knew where he was right now, I'd lie to you again."

She grabbed a two-barreled derringer from under a dirty pillow and stood with it at her side. "Now, if you're still set on showing what a big fierce man you are—start!"

She wasn't bluffing, he knew. He also knew he could get her wrist before she had the derringer all the way up.

"So you love the no good son!" he snarled.

"That's none of your damned business! At least, he never set out to kill a man. You're a dirty killer at heart, Brett Meredith. Jack's just out for the laughs there are in life."

She sat down on the bed suddenly and let the gun drop on a scrap of dust-covered faded green carpet. Here and there she'd made a stab to pretty up the place, but it was just like a hundred other rooms Meredith had seen in places like the Queen.

He drew a deep breath and glared at her. She wasn't even looking at him now, just sitting there with her mouth screwed up, her face not very clean, her eyes staring at the floor. Even then she was a handsome girl, and she was younger than he; but there wasn't much chance that she'd be either young or good looking very long.

She'd lied about Sarrett to Meredith, and now for the rest of her life she'd lie to herself about those twelve days with Jack Sarrett.

Meredith knew that as he stood there with his eyes bloodshot from dust and cold, with his hard, whiskered jaw tightening his mouth. He told himself he ought to knock her around until she couldn't go out on the floor for a month.

But all he did was walk from the room and leave her sitting there staring at a

faded scrap of carpet in a dirty, cold room where wind was pushing sand past warping window frames.

He stopped in a town on the Arkansas where rattlesnakes outnumbered other inhabitants, a town with a brand new church that had been donated by a traveling minister named Jonathan Starr.

"He was a handsome man with a vital, stirring appearance," a woman member of the congregation told Meredith, "and he wasn't afraid of an honest laugh. Of course, when we discovered that the lumber he donated for the church really belonged to the Santa Fe railroad, it was embarrassing." She rallied and went on staunchly. "But I'm sure Reverend Starr confused the pile with some that he had ordered."

"Uh-huh, so am I. And where is the Reverend Starr now, do you know?"

"He said he was going north to carry the Message to Blackfoot Indians in Montana."

Lord help the Blackfeet! Meredith thought.

Montana was a long ride away. Meredith didn't get there until spring. His man had been in Hardin in the fall. A saloonman who had fallen for the old buried Spanish treasure trick testified to that.

It was a long time later before Meredith again heard of Sarrett. The redhead was riding shotgun on a stage line out of Larned, making a living and hoping that someday the right robber would step out to make his play. Meredith had gone Clyde Betters one better. In spring clips on the floor of the stage he'd rigged a carbine and practiced until he could use his toe to flip it into his hands in no time if he ever needed backing for his shotgun.

Meredith was in love with Mary Linford then, daughter of the stageline owner.

She'd been alone in the office the day he'd dropped in to look at pictures in the hope of finding news of Sarrett. He was dusty and his clothes were in bad shape,

and never in his life had he been so aware of his appearance when Mary smiled at him.

"Just wanted to look at the pictures over there, ma'am."

"Go right ahead," she said, and smiled again.

He thumbed past the old one of himself and Sarrett before he realized. She wasn't like a lot he'd seen, so bright-pretty it smacked you right in the face. Her hair was kind of pale blond and not wavy at all. She was a slender girl, and he'd seen many with better curves, or at least more of them. It was her eyes and her smile, some kind of cleanness that ran all the way through her being.

All at once, even though he knew he was going to ride away soon and never see her again, he wanted to get rid of the circular of him and Sarrett. He got it when two men came into the office, one a blunt-jawed man who looked like he could use the gun on his hip, the other a slender youth in dark broadcloth.

The smile that Mary gave the youth was considerably different from the one she'd given Meredith, and it made him look a second time at the young whelp in broadcloth.

"I was thinking, Mary," the youth said, "that maybe Bart here would do for the guard your father wants."

"He might. Why don't you ask Dad, Roger?"

"Well, you know . . . your word with him . . ."

"After all, Roger, Dad is the boss."

"I know, but . . . well, all right, we'll ask your father."

The youth was not quite man-size, Meredith decided. He'd sounded like a kid who wanted to whine a little after his mother refused a favor, but was afraid to.

Meredith went over to the counter. "You need a stage guard?"

"Yes." She sized him up, and he knew that she was seeing plenty.

"I need a job, and I can handle it." Her eyes were the clearest he'd ever seen, a sort of hazel with green flecks in them. They looked at him for what seemed a long time.

"You're hired," she said, and only then did she glance at the door and let her eyes say that she trusted him not to shoot off his mouth.

D. C. Linford never knew but that he had done the hiring himself when he came in a half hour later. Meredith wasn't simple enough to think he'd charmed the girl, and he wasn't surprised at all to find out later that Bart was considered unreliable because of whiskey, or that he owed Roger Hammond's father money.

THE weeks rolled with the stages. Meredith had enough money to go on with his search, but he told himself he needed more; and besides, maybe Sarrett would come to him if he just waited long enough.

He didn't exactly dislike Roger Hammond, the only son of one of the town's leading merchants, but he did consider the youth a poor excuse for Mary, even if it was foregone that the two were to be married some day. Hammond wasn't much. He'd have been in the way in Chupadera and other places. But he had the stability of a town around him and money behind him, so maybe he'd be all right.

Meredith got to take Mary to dances several times when Roger was busy at the store. Finally the guard decided that Hammond wasn't going to have her at all. He began to tell himself that Mary's smile carried for him the same message it did for Roger Hammond.

One night when he was driving her home from a dance out in the country under starlight so bright he could have shot a tomato can at twenty paces, he stopped the buggy and said abruptly, "I've been saving my money."

"I know," she said, "and I think it's fine."

Nothing that had worked with other girls was any good now. The old, easy ways didn't even come to his mind.

"Look, Mary, the day I first saw you there in the office, when you trusted me without asking a single question, I—" He took a deep breath and looked at her face tilted up in the starlight. "I love you, Mary—something awful."

"I know." There was a sadness in her voice that chilled him. "I'm going to marry Roger, Brett."

"Why? He hasn't got—" He almost made the mistake of saying what he thought of Roger Hammond.

"I know he hasn't been hardened by trial as you have. I know you look down on him because he hasn't done the same things you have. But I love him and I'm going to marry him."

He didn't remember starting the horse. "What's wrong with me, Mary?"

"Nothing. You're as fine a man as I've ever known. Some girl will be mighty lucky—"

Some girl! Lord help him, there was only one girl in the world.

He stopped the horse again. "Look, if it's anything in my past that's hurting me, I'll tell you every—"

"No, Brett, it's nothing in your past, and if I loved you I'd marry you and never ask about your past."

"It is my past!"

She shook her head "No. I told the same thing to Jack Sarrett, and he believed—"

"Jack Sarrett!"

"I'll tell you everything now. He was here last summer. He came into the office his first few minutes in town, just as you did. Only he was sizing things up for a robbery. He told me afterward. Jack Sarrett stayed in Larned all summer and made Roger so jealous he couldn't sleep nights."

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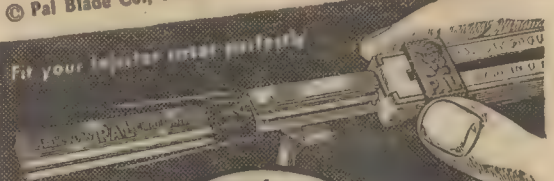


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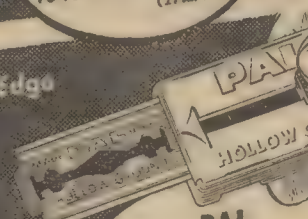
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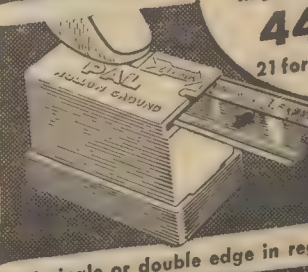
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"Jack Sarrett wanted to marry you?" Meredith choked back a curse.

"I finally convinced him I was going to marry Roger."

"Why, that Sarrett is the biggest outlaw—"

"I know. He told me everything. He told me about you, too. He said you'd be the bitterest, grimmest man I'd ever seen, and at first I thought he was right, but you've shed a lot of that since you've been here. Don't put it on again, Brett."

"Didn't the marshal—somebody—recognize—"

"He's changed a lot since that picture of you two—the picture you ripped away your first day in the office—was taken at Comanche Wells. Both of you have changed. Jack Sarrett lived quietly here. He bought a livery stable. He was well liked and popular."

Before they reached the lights ahead, Meredith stopped the buggy again. "Mary, this Hammond is no man for you. If it ever gets rough after you're married, you're going to have to carry the two of you."

"I know that," she said. "I love him, that's all."

It was all.

Meredith got Buzzer from the stable the next morning. He told D. C. Linford he was leaving. The old man's eyes were wise with knowledge he didn't speak. "You were the best man I ever had," he said. "Come back any time."

Meredith hadn't intended to see Mary again, but he had to. She was alone in the office, just as she'd been that day when dreams that would never be again had started to rise in a dusty, grim man.

"Don't go on and wreck your life doing something about a long-ago wrong that doesn't matter now," she told him.

"Will you marry me?"

"Please, Brett, let's not start that again."

"All right! You're the only person in

the world that could have stopped me from killing Jack Sarrett, but since you want him killed—"

She didn't say, 'You're being childish.' He was and he knew it. She shook her head at him gently and smiled.

"Good-by, Mrs. Hammond!" he said, and left her. The last he saw of Mary Linford she was standing at the window watching him mount Buzzer.

She waved as he rode away. He did not wave back.

CHAPTER FIVE

White Fire

HE RODE into a loneliness as big as the winds and plains ahead. For a while he hadn't been alone, but now he had no one to talk to, no place to run to for refuge. Days later the worst scalding bitterness was gone, and he wished then that he had been a man those last few moments in the office. He wished, too, that he had smiled and waved at her in leaving.

The only consolation that he had was that Jack Sarrett, for once, had been stopped cold. The filthy, clever son, trying to sell himself to Mary by pretending that he was in love with her. But it hadn't got him anyplace.

For once Meredith could laugh at him. But the trouble was he could not laugh at all.

In Dodge City he picked up Sarrett's trail again. This time it led into Wyoming.

Nights crouched beside far campfires with him. Days mocked him with their brightness. He had time to twist his thinking to suit his purpose, and there was no one to challenge his devious reasoning. Long before he reached Cheyenne he had charged his loss of Mary to Sarrett.

Sarrett had been in Cheyenne. He had allowed himself to be drawn into a sense-

less gunfight and killed two local toughs. The affair puzzled Meredith because it was unlike Jack Sarrett, who had always let force be his tool without actually using it. It was odd, too, that no one seemed to remember Sarrett for his laughing.

In Great Falls, Montana, Meredith lost the trail entirely. It was more than three years before he picked it up again. Necessity trapped him one winter near Fort Benton. Toward spring, when the madness of inaction was upon him, he stood in the doorway of a pole cabin, looking at a snow-locked range with dying cattle, and cursed the weather as he cursed Sarrett, and prayed for a chinook as he prayed to find Sarrett.

He tried Wyoming again, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, watching the towns where the big drives came through. And then he heard from a man in Kansas that Sarrett was dead.

He wouldn't believe it.

He heard it again from a Texan he'd known long before.

"Three, four years back," the fellow said. "The Rangers got him."

Sarrett was dead! Meredith had been robbed. He wasn't quite sane when he began to believe. He got violently drunk in Abilene, and would have killed three men who crossed him. A barkeeper reached out with a shotgun and dented the barrels on Meredith's head. The marshal returned his gun at the edge of town and pointed toward the road. Before Meredith reached Larned on his way to Texas to get the details of Sarrett's death, he bought new clothes.

Old D. C. Linford said that Mary and her husband were now somewhere in Colorado. Hammond's father was dead, the business sold, and the couple had gone to the mountains where Roger was going to make a fortune mining.

"I ain't heard from her in three years," Linford said. "It ain't good with her, or she'd have wrote." He shook his head.

"A fellow was here several months back asking about her. Asked about you too. Jack Sarrett, but when I knew him before his name—"

"Sarrett was here? A few months ago?"

Meredith finally reached the Denver address from which Linford had last heard of his daughter. It was a hotel. Nobody remembered the Hammonds or Sarrett.

Mining, Meredith thought. That's what Hammond had come for. He was somewhere in the mountains, and somewhere close was Sarrett, trailing along, trying to cause trouble, not satisfied with his rebuff.

Meredith didn't like the mountains worth a damn, but where Sarrett went. . . .

Just before spring, at an Indian agency somewhere near the Cochetopa, he was ready to turn back and again try the camps near Denver. The agent said that Zebulon Valley, on west, had no towns and no people except a few fool prospectors that likely had frozen by now.

"Coldest valley in America," the agent said. "Your breath freezes right in your mouth. Last fall the government sent a fellow in there with a hundred head of chunky red and white cattle just to see if they could make it through the winter. The man came past here last month. Said the cattle plumb froze to death. There's grass there, prettiest you ever saw, but that infernal cold. . . ."

"Red and white cattle?" Meredith asked.

"White-faced. I never saw any like 'em before."

Meredith had. Herefords. They didn't freeze easily.

"What did the man look like?"

The description could have fitted Jack Sarrett, an old sort of Sarrett who didn't laugh any more.

Meredith went into Zebulon Valley. The agent had been right about the cold, but where the sun had worked a little, on

southern slopes above a river as crooked as bent striped candy, there was bare sage and forage.

He found the carcasses of fifteen steers, and studied them a long time before he was sure they had been shot instead of frozen to death. In another month no one could have said. It took him three days to find the herd hidden in a feeder valley where they could paw snow for forage. They weren't in bad shape, considering. They had two bulls with them, and there was a good calf crop about due.

Inch by inch Meredith searched the big aspen log cabin he found at the lower end of the valley. It was well stocked with food. It was crudely built, but it was tight. Somebody had spent a lot of time hacking out furniture with an Army-issue axe. He frowned a long time at the second bunk, a small one with a bottom of willows crudely woven. No child had ever used it, because the upraised edges of the drying bark were unbroken.

Just another blind lead, Meredith thought. It was just one of many he'd followed. He'd been right about someone's pulling a sandy on the government. The man had shot a few steers as evidence to back up his report about the herd freezing. In a few weeks he could begin to move them deeper into the mountains, or just leave them where they were.

Any government official stupid enough to wonder if Herefords would freeze in this country wouldn't know enough to investigate thoroughly. And to a man who didn't know much, the scattered bones of fifteen steers would look like any number.

The whole thing smelled like a Sarrett trick, but it was too small, involving too much work. And that little bunk . . . no, he'd followed a bad hunch. He'd rest here overnight and be on his way in the morning.

Soon after the heat of the tiny cookstove hit him he was terribly drowsy. He went out and took care of Buzzer. There

was nothing to do but turn him loose and let him forage with the cattle.

Meredith didn't eat himself. He stoked the fire and lay down on the big bunk, with his gun under the sheepskin coat he was using as a pillow. These failures were coming to hit him harder and harder, now that there was special urgency to finish Sarrett before he spoiled Mary's life.

THE picture started years ago at Andy McRae's corral in the *brassada* was grooved deeply in Meredith's brain: finding Jack Sarrett, calling to him, watching him turn. Then he'd remind Sarrett of why he was going to die. The rest was a beautiful explosion of savagery, a vision so clear that it had brought Meredith from sleep many times, his teeth gritted, his hand holding a smoking, bucking gun so real that he'd had to look hard to know it was not there.

He was sound asleep in the heat when someone kicked open the door and walked in.

Meredith had his gun and was off the bunk before he knew more than that a man was in the room.

Blinding snow glare was all around the man, so that Meredith could scarcely see his lower body. But the fellow's head was well above the top of the open door, where the glare from outside did not hide anything. His hat was dragged down tight over a ragged shawl that Jack Sarrett would not have used to wipe down a lathered horse. Frost was just starting to melt on an unkempt black beard.

But nothing could change the gray eyes and the set of the wide mouth.

There he stood, the man who had made Meredith's life a bitter, searching hell, the man who had laughed at him for years. A hundred triumphant, blazing words ran in Meredith's brain. He couldn't say them all at once.

"You're mine, you dirty son!" he finally said.

Sarrett just stood there with the cold-fog rolling around him from the open doorway. Meredith didn't have to see more than his face, for his gun knew where to send its churning lead.

"Remember me, Sarrett?"

"I knew you were here, Brett, when I saw the same old Mexican sorrel out there with the cattle. About nine years old now, ain't he?"

Smooth, Sarrett was, like always; ready to talk himself out of any crack. His hands would be stiff from cold. He wanted a little time. That was fine. That was the way Meredith had always seen it. Jack Sarrett would get an even chance.

"Pull that door shut with your foot!"

Sarrett hooked the door shut with his foot. The glare from outside was killed. Meredith could see all of him clearly now.

Sarrett was holding a child, wrapped to the eyes in gray blankets.

The sight raised an unreasoning, savage frenzy in Meredith. "Put that brat down!" he yelled.

The boy that Sarrett unwrapped and stood on the dirt floor was pale and big-eyed, with a running nose and a face pinched from cold. He backed against Sarrett, staring at Meredith.

"Push him away!" Meredith said.

"Shall I kick him across the room?"

The boy had clutched Sarrett's leg.

Cattle bawled uneasily in the little valley while Meredith stood staring at Sar-

rett. This wasn't the man he had followed so long. It wasn't the insolent, laughing Sarrett who had ridden away from Gypsum Hill.

But still his name was Jack Sarrett and he had to die.

"How do I get this kid back where he belongs?" Meredith asked.

"He belongs here."

"You lie! Where's his folks? Where did you steal him?"

"His folks are dead," Sarrett said.

The Indian agency where Meredith had left his packhorse was only about thirty miles away. He could leave the kid there.

"Your fingers warm enough?" he asked.

"Good enough—if I had a gun."

"You lie again! Unbutton that sheepskin."

Sarrett had no gun.

Everything was wrong with the way he'd planned things to go. "Your gun out there on your horse?"

"I've got a rifle behind the seat in the wagon."

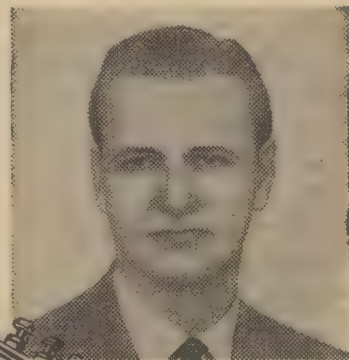
Wagon? Meredith had heard no wagon. He studied Sarrett narrowly. "We'll get that gun," he said.

The boy hung tight to Sarrett's hand as they walked through creaking snow to a spring wagon. It was going to be nasty for a kid, but when Sarrett tried his trick at the wagon . . .

He didn't. First, he lifted from the box a calf that had been bedded down in

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sawdust. It bawled and ran to its mother tied behind the wagon. After a while Sarrett shoved the calf aside and stole some of the milk in a bucket.

Still ready with his gun, Meredith took the rifle. It had been put away so carelessly that Sarrett couldn't have got it out in a hurry if he'd tried.

For the first time since Sarrett kicked the door open, Meredith wasn't quite sure of how to handle things.

They sat across the table from each other after the boy was asleep in the little bunk. Sarrett rolled a cigarette slowly. His hands were work-marked, Meredith observed. He'd be slow when the show-down came, so Meredith would have to see that he got an even chance.

It had to be settled Meredith's way. He'd ridden too far too many years for it to be any other way.

When the cigarette was going, Sarrett said, "I ran out on you down there at Elfego's place, sure. You weren't the first or last, but it's all done now."

"Almost." Meredith nodded. "Let's hear your side—if you think you've got one."

"No side to it," Sarrett said. "But I'll tell you."

The far valleys and towns flowed down his voice. The facts were all in and Sarrett denied none of them. He made some of them more damning. But from the first, Meredith sat looking at a man who didn't fit the past as it had been.

"... Sure, I laughed about it all, and after you got on my tail and I found it out, I had more laughs from that than anything. It was a great—until I met a girl in Larned, Kansas." He looked up from under his brows. The candle was on a shelf above them, where Meredith had put it so that it could not be knocked out quickly. It put deep hollows into Sarrett's face.

"I know, you've heard that one before, Brett. After you dropped a horn for me you probably never looked seriously at any

woman. You could always take 'em or ride on by, and so could I—until this happened."

Creaking cold put its weight against the cabin. The boy in the bunk breathed softly.

"She wasn't pretty," Sarrett said, "but there was something in her eyes and the way she smiled—"

"Skip that part!"

"All right. She wouldn't marry me, and I know now, and should have known at the time, that it was a good thing she wouldn't—for her, at least. But I'll take an oath that I was honest and sincere at the time."

"Oh, sure!" Meredith said.

SARRETT stared at the table. "You know how it is when you've rolled out after the best night's sleep you ever had, and while you're taking your first drag on a smoke you look out on a range that's just been washed shining clean by rain, with the sky so clear it hurts to look at it—and you're not thinking about yourself at all, or any stunts you want to pull. For just a little while everything is like it ought to be with a man." Sarrett nodded to himself.

"That's the way it was when I looked at Mary Linford."

"Damn you, I said to skip that stuff!" Mary's face was so clear that all Meredith's old hurt and bitterness came back. He saw Sarrett give him a quick, old glance.

"I don't say she changed me," Sarrett said. "I tried to change some and maybe I did—for a while. I know my thinking changed some." Shadows from outside and inside lay strong on his face. "She was in love with a townsman, a two-by-four kid that had never been out in the rain. She finally made me believe it.

"I rode away, and I wasn't much good for a while. I pulled a few jobs and didn't get any kick out of them. The money went like it always did—with less pleas-

ure. I started back to see old Andy McRae in Texas, and that was a bad mistake. The Rangers got me cold. A bullet through the chest, three years in a cell. I won't say that I thought about my sins much, because all I thought about was busting out of there.

"When they let me go, I wasn't exactly the same man that went in, not that I wasn't glad enough to get out. I spent a week with Andy. They come and go at his place, so he knew you'd been after me." Sarrett looked up quickly. "He got the money you sent, Brett. Andy said to look you up and make peace. Believe me, or go to hell—that's what I started out to do when I left there."

"To hell with you."

"I stopped in Larned to see Mary. She was married, of course, and gone. I found her in Denver. Her husband had sunk his money in a mine that was nothing, and then he'd blown what little she had from her father. He couldn't stand being broke, and she was a drag to him then, so he skipped out and went back to the hills."

Meredith clamped his jaw hard to keep from yelling a curse.

Sarrett's eyes were cloudy in the shadow-jumpy light. "She was working in a dancehall, Brett, one a little worse than most. It was the dirtiest jolt I've ever had to take to see her there. She wouldn't leave. I couldn't force her out. I offered her money and she said no. I didn't have it, but if she'd said yes I'd have got it quick. She said she was going to save her money and hunt her husband up. He'd just had a little hard luck, she said."

Meredith leaned forward, his jaw muscles quivering, his face as stiff as brittle leather.

"I went looking for that husband, Brett. I told him where she was and his townsman's scruples stuck out all over him in a second. All he could ask was why didn't she go back to her father. I knocked him clear across a room, and then I pulled my gun to kill him. I put it on him and between me and that gun Mary's face came up as clear as I see yours now.

(Continued on next page)

ONE of the most unusual white-Indian conflicts raged for years in the early days of Yellowstone Valley settlements. Disputes were generally settled by horse races, which the Indians invariably won. The whites finally imported "ringers"—tested race horses—from more civilized parts of the country, and inveigled the braves into betting a whole lot more than their shirts. The tribe lost all their horses, their buffalo robes and their negotiable gold on a single race—never recovered sufficiently to give any further real trouble!

THE taking of scalps was not always regarded with official distaste by white men in America. The colonies at various times offered bounties ranging from twenty to a hundred pounds for Indian scalps, depending on age and sex of the previous wearer; the French once offered prices for British scalps—and the British for colonials' scalps!

—Lance Kermit

(Continued from preceding page)

"When I got back to Denver, Mary was dead of penumonia."

"Dead

Sarrett nodded, his eyes haunted and old. "Her boy had been left in an old shack with a drunken woman to take care of him."

Meredith's head jerked toward the little bunk.

Sarrett nodded. "That's him. I had him with some decent folks there, but this spring I knew they were going back east. I want him, Brett. His father has lost all right to him, and his grandfather is too old to do much for him."

Meredith rose. "I'm going to kill Roger Hammond."

Sarrett stared at him. "I'd begun to guess that you'd loved Mary too."

"I'm going to kill Hammond."

"Sit down, Brett. We still have our problem."

Meredith sat down slowly. That was so. No matter what, this man was still Jack Sarrett. It was hard now to believe that he was, but he was.

"This is going to be the greatest ranching country in the state someday," Sarrett said. "My idea was to steal that herd and make a start for the boy. It's no good that way. When I went to Denver I only lied a little—about the fifteen steers I shot. All right, there's no herd, but the country's still here, and I've seen it in summer. One of us is going to hold down everything I've filed on and make a spread for that boy someday."

Meredith licked his lips. He had no anger left against Jack Sarrett, and he couldn't figure where it had gone, but still the thought that had driven him was grooved in his brain, without a will.

"I traded my gun for that wagon," Sarrett said. "But you always carried a spare gun in your blanket roll. The moon ought to be up now. It'll be bright as day out there on the snow. We'll go far enough

from the cabin so we don't scare the boy. When he wakes up in the morning—the one who isn't here just rode away in the night, understand?"

Sarrett shook his head slowly. "It isn't my way, Brett, and I know you think I'm trying to run something past you with talk. I told you when I left McRae's it was with the idea of making peace if you wanted it. You don't want it, and that's all right with me. I never did back down to any man and I'm not starting now. If I tried to crawl, I wouldn't be fit to think I could have raised Mary's boy and given him the right ideas about things."

Sarrett looked across the table steadily. A trace of his old smile flashed in the dark beard, a softer smile with the old mockery gone. "Anytime you say the word, Brett."

Meredith looked at the work-stiffened hands. He looked to where candlelight fell dimly on the sleeping boy.

Sarrett himself had gone a long way toward bringing decision. There were others though, and their words spoken far down the long trails of yesterday were just coming through to Meredith. Old Andy McRae, Pearl in the dirty room in Granada and Mary Linford, with her eyes and smile as clear and beautiful as the range Sarrett had described.

The gun in Meredith's hand was far heavier now than it had been when he plunged and stumbled through the brush with fever swarming through him. He pushed it across the table.

Sarrett looked at it a moment. "I remember when you bought that in Austin. Mine was just like it." He pushed it back across the table.

Meredith picked it up and tossed it under the large bunk. He took off his hat, the fifth one that had carried the same small packet sewed inside.

"We got a hundred to start with," he said. "Two of us can do something with this country—and the boy."

Too late he knew he was the last of his kind, living by a dead man's code . . . a code that thundered: "I've ridden too far with a rope around my neck, lawman—now I'll die with my bullet in your heart!"



The horse tried its best to topple the young dude. . . .

THE LAST BADMAN

By WILLIAM R. COX

JOHNNY HARE rode the stolen horse across the desert and thought he saw the first towering cottonwood, and then he knew he had made it. Even if he didn't see it, he could smell the tall trees of Granite, he thought. He wiped the white dust from the edges of his dry lips and grinned. His leathery face cracked with the effort, but he was a man who liked to grin.

He debated his chances. The horse

was almost finished. The brand was blotched anyway, and it had been two hundred miles due west when the trouble started. Maybe it would be all right about the horse. It had to be all right, because there was no place to hide its carcass even if he shot it. The sand stretched for too many miles, flat and shimmering with heat waves sharp and pitiless under the bowl of brass which was the sun.

The wires would be hot with the story,

but the description of Johnny Hare would be vague and misleading. Nobody in Granite knew him. He did not think they would connect a little fellow like him with the gory doings at Leadtown several weeks ago.

He shrugged. He had to go on. He sat loose in the saddle, a short man, scarcely five feet six, with blue eyes and a mild, amused expression. The horse stumbled along.

And then there was a tree. But it was not Granite, not the lined street of which the citizens were so proud. This was a single cottonwood, brave beside a bare trickle of a stream. The horse whinnied and broke into a pitiful, staggering gallop.

When Johnny swung down, letting the animal drink, the single gun lay loose against his thigh. He bent to fasten the rawhide string which pegged it down, watching the house beyond the tree.

It was a small house, sun-drenched, and the tree threw a shadow across it. There was a huge corral beyond and a barn of sorts and a windmill which had been concealed by the cottonwood. Brushing more dust from his nondescript clothing, Johnny trudged toward the house.

As he came close he perceived the fluttering of a curtain at a window. Instinctively he paused, worked loose the kerchief around his neck, gave himself another dusting, retied the gaudy bandanna. It occurred to him that he had worn this piece of cloth across the bridge of his nose while they had been holding up the Leadtown Bank. He had kept it in place even when the shotguns so cleverly planted had gone off and dropped Leadpants and Snark as they came out with the loot. He had been biting it when his horse went down and he had to steal the cayuse and ride out ahead of the posse which had formed this time like magic, because somehow the plans had gone wrong. He stopped thinking about Leadtown. There was a woman in this house, and he had

to be prepared to make talk with her. Johnny Hare called, "Helloooo, the house."

From beyond the house came an answering, "Yipeeee! Ride 'im cowboy! Yipeeee."

Johnny stumped around the edge of the white cottage. There were two figures atop the corral fence. There was dust rising and the sound of hoofs.

He shook his head. Weariness was in his every bone. He was cramped and nerve-wrung from the saddle—and here were people having fun around a horse corral.

He limped along. He seized a rail and climbed with painful effort. He perched himself alongside a laughing girl. On the other side of the girl was a middle-aged, thin man in levis and a faded shirt.

The girl glanced at him, still smiling. She wore a man's shirt and a divided skirt and riding boots with high heels. She had brown eyes and brown hair. She was very pretty. She said, "Howdy, stranger. You ever see a dude try out a stock saddle and a hammerhead cayuse?"

Johnny said, "I reckon I'm seein' it now."

In the corral a young man was astride a dun bronco which showed down its back the black streak of mustang strain. The horse was bucking, the young man was clinging to the horn with one hand and a foot was loose from the stirrup. The horse sunfished.

The young man's head seemed about to be severed from his spin by the shock, and the other foot lost its stirrup. The girl howled, "Ride 'im, Jed! Rake 'im and ride 'im!"

Johnny said mildly, "You don't like that young feller?"

The girl's smile deepened. "Why, how would I know, stranger? He hasn't finished the ride!"

"I see," nodded Johnny. "You don't know him very well yet."

The man next to the girl drawled, "Only in town. He cuts a persnickety figger in a square dance. Even showed Daisy how to waltz, like in New York." The man had a pleasant, mild face and dark eyes, like the girl. He said, "I'm Simon Foster."

Johnny Hare said, "Uh—they call me 'Shorty', which shouldn't be no surprise to anybody. Shorty Snow. But I like 'Johnny' a lot better. Looks like your feller done finished."

The man grinned. The girl was watching, her smile gone. The cayuse, weary of fooling around with a man whose knee grip was inadequate, crabbed, side-wheeled and stood up on its hind legs.

The girl cried, "Hey! Midnight never did that before!"

The horse toppled backwards, seeking to pin down the rider. Johnny, Foster and the girl all hit the corral dirt together, racing for the spot where the young Easterner could well be a broken bag of bones beneath a half ton of kicking horseflesh.

They all stopped at once. The young man was sitting on the head of the cayuse. He was a smooth-faced youth, with tow-colored hair, cut rather short. He had lost his hat. He wore range clothing obviously new and stiff. He said plaintively, "This animal knows tricks that were not in any book I ever read. This animal is spiteful. When I spurred him, he tried

to sit on me. I would far rather sit on him. But how do I get up without having him bite me to pieces?"

Simon Foster took the reins still wrapped about the young man's wrist and got a tight grip on the bit in the rolling-eyed mustang's mouth. He said, "Jest git up, Jed. I'll take over from here."

The young man got up. He felt of himself very gingerly. "No busted bones," he announced wonderingly. "You know what? I'm more durable than I imagined." He looked hard at Johnny. Then he looked at the girl. Foster was getting the mustang to its feet. The young man turned, snapped the rein from Foster and swung in one quick motion into the saddle. "Open the gate?" he asked Johnny pleasantly.

Johnny opened the gate. The cayuse bolted. The young Easterner sat very straight in the saddle, and his spurs raked at the broncho's sides. In a moment both were out of sight around the house, heading westward on the desert.

"Now that is quite a dude," said Johnny.

Foster nodded. "I been tellin' Daisy—this here's my daughter, Daisy, Johnny."

The girl said defensively, "Did I say he wasn't?"

"Hard to please," said her father, nodding to Johnny. "Like to have an old maid on m' hands, she's so hard t' please."

"I'm twenty-two," she informed John-



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ny. They were walking toward the house. At the back door Johnny made a last swipe at the dust on him. His horse was whinnying for feed, now that his thirst was slaked.

Foster said, "I'll take care of him. You get what you need from Daisy. Looks like you need it pretty bad. Shoulda tended to yuh before. Guess we were excited 'bout young Jed Hill."

Johnny said, "It was right instructin'." He followed Daisy into an immaculate kitchen. She handed him the dipper and he hit the water bucket, sipping the liquid as if he had never tasted it before, savoring every drop. He said, "Twenty-two, huh? You sure are agin', for this country—and you purty as you are."

She said, "There's a lot of men come by here, but they're all tall in the saddle and short in character."

"Character?" Johnny's sandy eyebrows went up.

"Manners . . . heart . . . the way they act and think and live. That's character." She busied herself at the stove.

"Don't git no ideas about me," said Johnny hastily. "I'm one of them you spoke about, except I ain't tall."

"I expect you are," she nodded. "But you've got the wrinkles from thinking. You've made the long rides, with nothing to do but study things out, and you're the studying kind."

HE SAID, "I kin see right now it was hard on them poor waddies yearnin' for a smile from your purty lips. Lady, lady, what a time you musta give them poor galoots!"

"Jed Hill has money," she said. "He's an Easterner. I can't make a Westerner of him, and I can't go East, not me." She was frying eggs and ham. She said, "It's always easier to talk to a stranger about things, isn't it?"

"Allus," nodded Johnny. "Safer, too."

"He's a right nice boy," she said half to herself. "He's got courage and decency

and good manners. He eats like a man, not a hawg. He laughs and dances, but he could work too. He's strong and he's not lazy."

Johnny said, "This dude sounds like the goods, all wool and an honest yard wide."

"But he's an outlander," she brooded. Her eyes went to the lone cottonwood, the desert beyond. In the far distance the sun was setting behind the mountains and you could see the serrated tops of the mountains, but you could not ride there in less than a hard, long day. Between this ranch on the edge of Granite and the hills was desolation. She said, "How can an outlander learn to love this country? And how can you know if he does, without waiting through years of his staying here? And how could I bind a man, not knowing whether he would stay—and love it?"

"Those are little, hard things," said Johnny softly. "Those are things a body can't ever know for sure. Things a gal has got to take—on faith."

She looked up from the fry-pan. She said, "And I lack faith. You are right, Johnny."

He looked into her eyes and saw that this was a girl worth traveling through hell from Leadtown to see and speak with. He looked for a long moment. He was of this desert country, as was she. He was accustomed, as she had known, to the long silences, the being alone which is not loneliness. But unlike Johnny, she had not joined forces with Snark and Lead-pants in a moment of revolt and despair and made a sortie into Leadtown to rob a bank, only to know, after the debacle, that success would have been worse than the failure which transpired. She had been more careful of her dreams.

He said, finished the dipperful of water, "It ain't for me to tell yuh what you ain't got. Me, I wish—"

There was a dull sound of hoofs and Jed Hill rode the cayuse proudly around into view and Foster opened the gate of

the corral and their voices could be heard, cheerful and loud, as they unsaddled the chastened bronc.

Daisy said, "It wasn't a real buckner, you know."

"Just a hammerhead," nodded Johnny. "You wouldn't give him a killer, nach'ly."

"I guess I'll never know," she sighed. "I don't dare try to find out how he is all the way through."

"On account o' you might make a corpus of him," Johnny agreed drily. "Women sure is somethin'. Somethin' awful purty, too," he added, sighing.

She laughed and the other two men came toward the house and Johnny ate his eggs and ham, his first meal at a table in many a long week.

GRANITE seemed an all right town to Johnny Hare—all right for him at present, that was. It was a good-sized county seat, he was more or less introduced by the Fosters, there was no one who knew him as Johnny Hare.

The Law was personified by Sheriff Lance Manning, a tall, very dark, black-haired man with piercing black eyes. One look at the Sheriff when Daisy was around and Johnny knew he was one of those who had been weighed and found wanting in Daisy's scheme of things.

As for the Sheriff, he took one look at Johnny, diminutive, bowlegged, saddle-worn, and dismissed him as a rival. Manning was concentrating on Jed Hill, anyway, being well aware of the way the wind blew there.

This Manning had a high nose and cheekbones to match, and after a while Johnny remembered several things about him, things which he had heard in night camps, in El Paso and Dodge City and Tucumcari and Santa Fe. This Manning was a lightning-draw, a gunslinger, they said. There was a time when he could have been on the other side of the law, but by the narrowest of margins he had

managed to retain his legal standing. Now he had got himself elected sheriff in these parts, which was right smart going for such a man, Johnny admitted.

Manning said shortly to him, "How are you, Shorty?"

"I prefer Johnny. Makes me sound more important, even if I ain't."

Manning did not answer. His dark eyes were on Daisy. Jed Hill was sitting on the steps of the hotel porch and Daisy was seated in a rocking chair. Johnny leaned against a post, and he too looked at Daisy. In her town clothes she looked awful good.

Manning's glance shifted to Jed Hill. "I heard you was headin' back East."

Hill said, "Rumor, my dear Sheriff. Pure rumor. I assure you that I have not lost anything back East that I should go seeking there."

"Mebbe it was West," suggested Manning.

"West?" Hill seemed to miss entirely the implication that westward lay the path of departed souls. "Now why should I hie myself West? No, my interest lies here."

The Easterner did not fail to put over his meaning there, Johnny thought. Hill had no idea of concealing his like of the girl. When the sheriff's dark face grew coppery-red with suppressed rage, Hill merely smiled.

This was unwise. Johnny shifted his position and said, "I see yore pappy callin' for you, Daisy. Down to the store. C'mon, Jed, leave us investigate the wickedness of this town. You got money, I got a thirst. Daisy'll excuse us."

He made it stick, too, because he had a way about him when he chose to use it. He and Hill walked Daisy down to the store, leaving Manning to his consuming jealousy.

At the store, Daisy said, "Father isn't here. He's in the bank. But I have some material to match. I'll see you at sup-

pertime. Don't you boys be too wicked."

Johnny said, "Don't reckon this boy will be wicked noways. But me—I'm honin' for a spot of it. He can chapyrone me."

Hill said, "Lead on, my friend. Expose me to this wickedness. In a full six months I have found it far from tempting in Granite."

They walked side by side beneath the line of towering cottonwoods. Johnny said, "Scarce as water is and puny as the soil is, yuh wouldn't expect these people to keep trees. But ain't they purty?"

Hill said, "Did you come here just to see and admire them?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Johnny. Hill would learn not to ask these questions in due time, but meanwhile he was merely being friendly, Johnny knew. "Is that there a saloon? Do they sell whiskey?"

The place had swinging doors and from it came sounds of laughter and the clinking of glasses. Hill said, "This is a matter we should determine. 'The Granite Bar', it reads over the door. Now, I wonder. . ."

The two pushed in. The bartender, a cadaverous man with an amazing handle-bar mustache, called, "Howdy, Jed."

A couple of barflies raised bleary gazes and smacked their lips. "Well, Mr. Hill's back. Sure is good to see yuh, Mr. Hill!"

At a battered piano a woman sat fingering the keys. She called huskily, "I'll take the same, Jeddy-boy."

Hill said, "You know, I believe this is a saloon!"

"Uh-huh," nodded Johnny solemnly. "Glad we found it."

"Sheer accident," said Hill cheerfully. He put a shining gold piece on the bar and the gloomy gent with the mustache reached and came up with a bottle of the house special. The eyes of the barflies watered with delight.

"Quaint custom they have here," Hill observed, as though this was happening

for the first time. "Everyone drinks on everyone. I like it."

Hill bought for the house, the house bought for Hill and Johnny; then Hill bought for the house.

DAISY would be glad of that, Johnny thought. Daisy should be proud of this boy who did not push in, but cheerfully assumed that all the world respected him as he respected others. Daisy was making a mistake, malingering about this boy.

Then there was Manning. Of course it was none of Johnny's business, but Manning was poison. Johnny never made mistakes about gentry of the Manning ilk. No matter what spots they were wearing, they were still spots, they never changed.

Manning, like the others, carried his enforcement in the holster on his hip. If, for instance, he knew that Johnny Snow was Johnny Hare and that there was a reward posted for him dead or alive, there would be no doubt about Manning's procedure. He would render Johnny dead, collect the prize and feel happy about the whole thing.

So, thought Johnny, well into his fourth whiskey, Manning wanted Daisy. His overwhelming love for himself naturally would not let him see that Daisy would never have him. To Manning the danger to his conquest came from without. It came not from Daisy but from his rivals. And now Manning saw, without question, that his dangerous rival was Jed Hill.

That was the difference between the East and the West. That was the difference Daisy felt. Hill would never believe that Manning could deliberately gun for him. Daisy knew it was possible, even probable. . . .

Hill was singing a song and the frizzy-haired woman at the piano was accompanying him and everyone was having a

good time. This was a nice boy, this Hill, a good boy and game. Johnny refused another drink of whiskey and took a glass of water. After the desert ride, water looked awful good to him at any time of day.

He saw Manning enter by the rear door. He was not surprised. Hill had finished the song and was talking to the pianist. Manning went, in the manner of his kind, directly to Hill. He spoke emphatically, yet no one but Johnny could hear, Johnny and the woman.

"Yuh can't take a hint, Hill. So I'm tellin' yuh. Get outa town. East—west, I don't care. But don't be in town tonight at sundown."

Hill said good-humoredly, "What's the joke, Sheriff? Did I break the law that bad?"

"This ain't law. This is personal," said Manning.

"Then, if you are serious, you are being ridiculous," said Hill.

"You keep thinkin' that way and you'll be a corpse!" Manning's eyes were demoniac, glaring. There was no question he meant what he said. When his glance went to Johnny there was a moment's flicker, not of caution nor fear, but of speculation. Then he walked out of the barroom.

The woman said in a scared, low voice, "You better go, Jed!"

Hill said, "Are you mad? The man is

drunk or demented. Why—I don't carry a gun. He couldn't murder me!"

Johnny took the young man's arm. He said gently, "Leave us go to some quiet place. They's some things need explainin'."

"But it's so damned silly!" protested Hill.

"Exactly," nodded Johnny. "This here country can be plumb loco. But one man, namely you, can't change it." He was expertly steering Hill out the rear door through which Manning had made his entrance. They walked along back lots, making a circle toward the hotel. It was already growing late in the afternoon. Manning had not meant to leave Hill time to rally his forces. Johnny was talking rapidly, forestalling Hill's reasonable objections.

"This is the way things are, as man made 'em in the West. Manning has named it to you. That leaves you two things to do: Either fight him or leave town." He put up a hand to stop Hill's attempt to speak. He said gently, "If you stay and don't fight him, he'll pistol-whip you or hosswhip you. If you try to fight with your fists, he'll gun you or muzzle-swipe you."

Hill said, "Johnny, you are a man of wisdom. I know that. But look—I can't fight him. I scarcely know one end of a revolver from the other."

"It is allowable that you chose a rifle.

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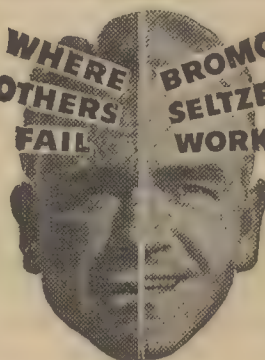
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Hill said vigorously, "Making all due allowances for your wisdom and your well wishes, I shall do neither. If he tries to attack me, I shall defend myself and appeal to—"

"There ain't no court of appeal," Johnny said flatly. "And—there is Daisy."

Hill flushed. "She can't possibly—" He stopped. He knew very well that she could possibly, and indubitably would, abide by the custom of this barbaric land.

Johnny rolled a cigarette. He lit it and puffed smoke in silence for a moment. Then he said, "There ain't nothin' I kin do about it, Jed."

"Why should you do anything?" murmured Hill.

"That's for sure. But me, I'm a kinda nosey feller. And he called me 'Shorty' in a manner which sorta rubbed me the wrong way. But if I butted in, then you would still be—well, you see it."

They walked on. They turned along the side of the hotel. Already the trees where casting long, thick shadows over the main street of Granite. Hill said, "Ironie is the word. If I wish to stay and prove to Daisy that I can make this my country, live here all my life—then I must die!"

Johnny said, "Now, if you was to take the train. And I was to speak to that lady perfessor in the barroom . . . nobody else heard Manning orate. And then—somethin' happened to Manning whilst you was gone—you savvy?"

Hill smiled. He looked very young when he smiled. He said, "I believe you fell in love with Daisy yourself, on sight! Nobody would do such a thing for me. But of course that won't do. And you are right about everything." He clasped Johnny's arm in friendly fashion and

asked, "A greener? Will you get one for me? I've shot a few birds, you know. And some small game. A shotgun, if I'm quick, should match his revolver."

Johnny said, "Uh-huh. Quick—and ready when the time comes to be quick. You go 'head and eat with the Fosters. Tell 'em I'm in a li'l card game. And then—the train'll be gone while you're with them. The greener'll be at the hotel desk. When you come out with it, walk in the middle of the street, toward that there bar we jest left. When you see Manning, don't say nothin'. Understand that good. Don't speak. Just let go with one barrel. Then let 'im have the other. Kin you do it?"

Hill's lips had gone white. He said, "I—I think I can, old man. Survival of the fittest, and all that. I—I think so."

"Waal, go on, then."

He watched the young Easterner enter the hotel. He shook his head.

Hill couldn't do it. He'd have to talk, give Manning a chance. That was the way Hill was built, and it was a good way, and under other circumstances Johnny would have admired it. But Hill did not know the Manning breed, and Johnny did.

There could be but one outcome of this. Manning would kill the boy.

Johnny walked back to the corral. His horse—the one he had stolen, that is—was rested and strong. The saddle hung over the top rail of the fence. Southward not too far lay the border.

JOHNNY walked around the squat, sprawling hotel. He heard the whistle of the train. It would be in—and it would be gone within the half hour. He could see through the windows into the dining room.

Daisy was laughing and talking. Foster was grinning, drawling. Jed Hill was responding, his gestures easy, his face clear, no strain apparent in him.

Nice people, Johnny thought. The best kind of people. Hill was new, but he was good. In a few years there would be more like Hill and less like Manning—and none at all like Johnny Hare.

Well, the country was growing up. It wasn't so blamed humorous to steal a few cattle and start a small spread of your own with a Window Sash brand any more. But Manning could still run his bluff.

Johnny went back to the corral. He took down the heavy saddle and put it on the horse. He walked, going the back way, leading the cayuse. There were other mounts in front of the Granite Bar, and he unobtrusively tied his animal there among them.

He strolled down to the station. The train departed. Manning came out of the shadows, a tall, straight-backed figure, his gun slapping at his thigh with every step. He moved into the street and slowly began his patrol.

He would go up and down until Hill came from the hotel. He would walk that beat all night, if necessary. When he saw Hill again, he would shoot him or beat him, and then Hill would have no face at all in the land.

Crazy, thought Johnny, *all crazy*. Everyone crazy, most of all Johnny Hare. He moved in the shadows thrown by the big trees, and the sun went almost to rest. The shadows concealed him very well from passersby, him being such a little fellow.

He had never been gun-quick in the class with Manning and those like him. He had been a working cowboy. That had been the reason for his downfall—he had been a working cowboy. For long years it had contented him, and he had been as others.

Then for some mysterious reason it had not contented him and he had fallen in with Snark and Leadpants. They were dead. He was alive and no penny richer

in pocket for his fall from grace. He could read nothing in this that would help. After a moment he abandoned the thought of it.

He watched Manning go up and down. He moved to where he could see into the dining room again. There were lamps on now and he plainly saw Jed Hill arise, bow in his polite manner to Daisy and walk out. He saw Daisy staring after him as if surprised by his departure, saw Foster's slowly dawning frown of wonderment.

He moved among the trees. Manning was coming back, toward the hotel, tall, alert, silent. Johnny hurried, getting between Manning and the place where Jed Hill would have to show himself. He could see Daisy plain from there.

He saw her get up from the table, turn to the door. Foster said something and she shook her head. Daisy had sensed that something was up. She was hurrying now, after Jed Hill.

Johnny sighed. He stepped out under a cottonwood tree. He waited there, in the shadow. If the timing was right, if Manning was the man Johnny thought he was, it might work.

his hands. In the doorway to the barroom

Jed Hill came out with the shotgun in the woman piano player crouched. She had kept her counsel, but she could not resist watching. Others of the town, curious at Manning's patrolling, looked curiously at the tall man making his silent rounds.

Manning came close to where Johnny waited. Jed started down the steps, across the boardwalk.

Johnny stepped into the sheriff's view. He said flatly, "Manning! I'm Johnny Hare, outa Leadtown."

A thousand dollars, maybe, was on his head. He stood there, a little man, waiting. Manning halted. Jed had not yet come into view. Manning said, "So?" with rising inflection.

Then the big sheriff's hand went down to the revolver at his side. He was slick and he was fast. When Johnny drew he knew that already the .45 was belching, that, sure as shooting, he was going to be hit.

He concentrated on what he must do. He fired without raising the revolver. He fired again, as he went down. There was fire in his body and fire coming from his gun and there was a heap of smoke and then he could not hold his gun and his hands went involuntarily to his side, and he lay there, curled up, a small bundle of clothing in the twilight, beneath the cottonwood tree.

But in the center of the street Sheriff Lance Manning staggered a dozen steps before he too fell down. Then he did not move any more, because the second bullet from Johnny's gun had entered his heart.

Jed was running and Daisy was running. Jed had dropped the greener and the woman from the saloon picked it up, to show people that Jed Hill had been going after Manning under the code, and was telling in her husky voice that somehow Manning had got sidetracked into shooting it out with that little bow-legged stranger, that Johnny Snow, and doggone if Snow hadn't downed the sheriff, who was certainly plumb loco and it was too bad Snow had to get his first. . . .

Then Johnny could dimly hear Daisy saying, "Lance must have been insane—oh, Jed! He was after you! Lance wanted to kill you!"

"Yes." Hill's voice sounded funny. "I don't know what happened. But I can guess. Where is the doctor? Get him, quick!"

It was all right, so far. They didn't know he was Johnny Hare, not yet. If he didn't die, maybe he could get to his cayuse yet. He made an effort. Nothing happened.

But he had heard Daisy's voice when she knew Manning was after Jed, and when she knew Jed had been going to meet Manning. Her doubts were gone, now. He knew that much—hurt as he was, he could tell it from the sound of her voice.

A lot of things happened about which Johnny was vague. He could never tell how much of it was dreaming, that was the trouble.

At last he was pretty sure of motion. It was like riding in a wagon, up the trail, sleeping out a hitch after night-herding. He opened his eyes.

Daisy was there. Behind her was Jed Hill. There was motion, all right.

Daisy said, "You're on a train, going East. There's a doctor Jed knows about. You've got an even chance of doing just fine, Johnny."

Jed Hill said, "Nonsense, my dear. He's going to get well. He's going to live to play uncle Johnny to our children."

Johnny saw the wedding ring on Daisy's hand, then. He said feebly, "Y'awl went and did it whilst I was laid up? Doggone, people ain't got no consideration. Now there was an occasion I coulda got drunk and danced with a bride!"

Jed Hill said, "And then he's going to work for me. I've got plenty of jobs for a man like Johnny Snow." Jed was trying to keep his voice light and jocular and not succeeding very well. He knew the score.

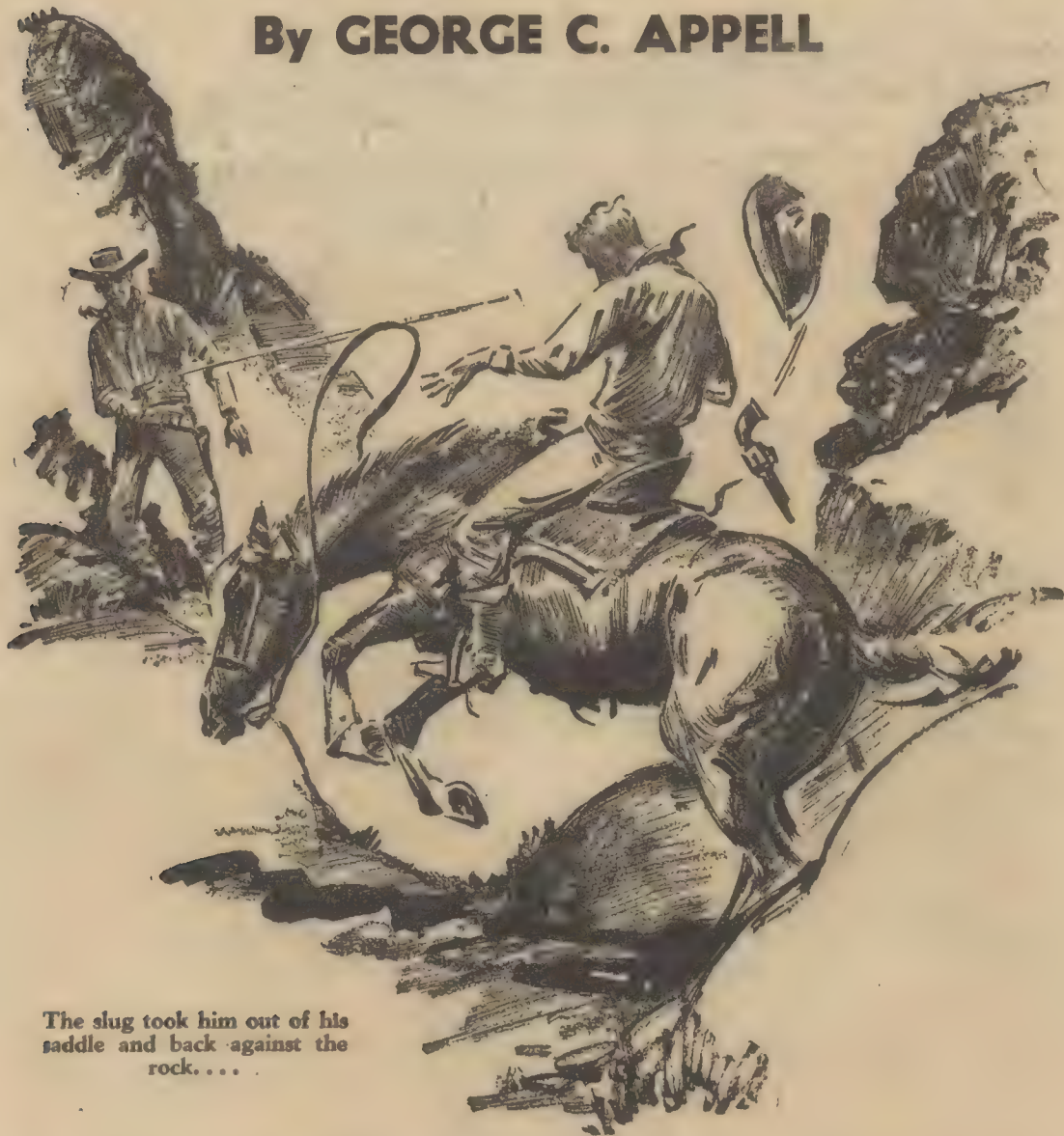
So they did not know he was Johnny Hare. He wondered, quite humbly and with real wonder, if Johnny Hare hadn't died when Lance Manning shot him under the cottonwood tree in the town of Granite.

He hoped so. Now he closed his eyes and tried to sleep some more, because the pain was still in him. He hoped Johnny Hare was dead and he could manage to be around and play with the children of Daisy Hill.

*"This is trail's end, stranger—on the road that hell for-
got. You're welcome to live by your gun—
or die by mine!"*

LET BULLETS WAIT

By **GEORGE C. APPELL**



The slug took him out of his
saddle and back against the
rock. . . .

I COME awake fast and clawed down for my gun, but she was gone. My pony was still yonder, 'grabbin' at bunch grass, the reins down like I'd left them, but I didn't have no gun and I jack-knifed up, straight away from the warm wallow, and that's when I saw my

gun. It was hard down on me, and I looked along the flannel sleeve behind it and up the shoulder and into a pair of black eyes that couldn't seem to sit down and relax. They was movin' all over the place, but never leavin' me for long.

"What causes you to nap trail-side,

young feller?" He swung my gun to and fro. "Get up."

He had a black hat, flat-crowned and wide-brimmed, and it shadowed most of his face. He had a long face, with narrow jaws, and when he spoke his lips hardly moved.

I told him the truth. "I got plumb tired, that's why. On my feet, I said, "That seems to be my gun, don't it?"

"It surely does." He swung it toward my pony. "Mount, feller. Pull out that way—ahead of me."

I caught up my pony and headed out the way I was told, with this man just behind me. He told me to stay right in the sunpath. He said he always liked a silhouette to shoot at. And down my spine somethin' cold trickled—like the slow stroke of a Colt's muzzle.

He said, "What's your business?"

"Last brand I rode for, I was peelin' broncs. One before that, I was blabbin' calves."

"Quite a jump, ain't it?"

"Some'd think so."

He snickered. "You lookin' to sign on?"

"Mebbe. Man's got to eat."

He didn't say anything for about a mile. All I could hear was his hoofs thumpin' and his cinchin's squeakin' an' sometimes that snicker. Then he said, "Turn right, here."

I put my pony off the trail and up a slope and down its other side. There was flatland down there, with mesquite tufts on it, and beyond the flats were some ridges. The high country was west of the ridges. We filed across the flats and into the ridges, goin' up all the time, and still that man didn't speak. He didn't even snicker anymore, and when I turned to see how he was, he jerked my gun onto me and glared. I faced front again and kept ridin'."

Toward sun-fall, we raised a narrow little canyon not more'n half a mile long,

and a man come out of it and watched us awhile. I could make out his face, finally. It was plump-like and happy and not much older'n mine. He was grinnin'.

"Whatcha got, Streckfus?"

The man behind me called, "Found him sleepin' back by the wallows. Thought he'd better come in."

"He ain't the law, is he?"

Streckfus said "No, I flushed him afore he woke up. He's a saddlebum, by the looks of that hull he's ridin' . . . stop there, you."

I stopped. The merry gent stepped up, and I saw he had no gun nor even a holster. "Lookin' for work?"

"I am."

Streckfus swung down and ambled over and put those twitchin' eyes to me. "What d'you think, Side?"

"I think he looks hungry. Let's feed him."

I clumb down and dragged reins over my pony's ears and talked to Side. "Thanks for the invite, but I don't feel easy dinin' in the open without a gun. So if you'll tell your outrider here—"

Side jerked a thumb. Streckfus hung back a minute, like he was displeased, but he handed it over in the end. Barrel-first, like he might shoot any second. Side said, "Odds against him. Come on, let's eat."

Down in the canyon, a pit fire was goin', not smokin', and what must have been Side's horse was on a hobble yonder. Two blankets were spread, and there was a spider over the pit and a can of coffee on the spider. I could smell it.

"Got sackin'?" Side asked. I didn't know whether he meant tobacco or blankets, but I said "Yes," bein' in possession of both. We three lit up, and this feller Side slapped some salt mule on the spider and watched it burn.

Streckfus found a tarnished silver flask and offered it to Side, but Side shook his head. Then Streckfus took a long pull at it, without offering it to me, and stuck it

back in his bags. Presently he unsaddled and turned his animal out, and I did likewise. Night was comin' down, and they both seemed to relax a little.

I wish I could have.

We ate off meat cans, and I kept front to Streckfus 'cause I didn't want those eyes between my shoulderblades. It was nothin' he said or did, it was just the cut and warp of him and the way he looked at Side sometimes. He looked at Side like he looked at me—as if he was judgin' which cut of the meat to have first.

We scoured off and lit up and lay back a spell, and pretty soon Streckfus crabbed over to Side, and they commenced to mumble back and forth. I caught the word 'Benteen', and Side nodded. And I heard 'Cedar Box', and that was about all. I figured it could be worse. Streckfus could've holed me where I lay sleepin' back there, and nobody would ever knowed the difference. Not for a while, leastways. And I guessed they were talkin' about me now, mebbe dealin' me into something. Then Side said, "Come on over."

He dug his smoke into the sand and let the last of it come out through his nose. Streckfus was layin' back on one elbow, and all I could see was his feet and cartridge belt, the fire was so low. Side said, "Where you from?" He didn't say it insolent, like Streckfus had sounded, but soft and polite.

It come over me that I could take to this Side. "The Paradise. Over on Yount's place."

Side nodded. "Get run off—if I can ask?"

I took a deep breath on that one. "Yuh, I did." I snubbed my smoke out. "Yount said he was losin' stock, somehow. I didn't like the way he said it."

Side looked at Streckfus, but Streckfus was lookin' at me. "Ever hear of Benteen?"

"Benteen? No, I ain't."

Side said, "They call me Side 'cause I ride side-hung in the saddle." That seemed to be the end of his curiosity. It come like a windup of suspicion, and he stuck out his paw and I took it. "I never packed a gun. They make for trouble. That's why the side-hung. The look-around."

Streckfus looked around at him. "Some people talk too much." He said it like somethin' had gone bad in his mouth.

Side shrugged. "You gonna ride with a man, you might's well tell him your name."

Streckfus was full on me again. "We deal in stock, bub. We can use a man can handle a drive."

"You got one." I told him, "My name's Red."

Side said, "All right, Red. Only keep your gun under leather."

I WAS about to tell him he could sleep on it if he wanted to, but already he was winkin' at me, and I winked back and we both grinned a bit. Streckfus didn't like any of it, and pretty soon he rolled into his threadbare and tore into a snore. His holster was under his chest.

Side and me had one more smoke, and a couple of times he tried to get somethin' out, but it never came. All he said before he rolled in was, "We don't like daylight, so we're up before it comes."

That gave me the play, and I slept on it.

We had the breakfast fire under dirt before dawn, and we took out of that place leavin' it as if no man had ever been there. We rode south, Streckfus 'way in front, stoppin' often to look ahead. Then me, in the middle, then Side, half a mile back. They neither of 'em ever explained the show and I didn't ask, bein' a hand of sorts out here. I just kept ridin', pacin' myself on Streckfus and keepin' the interval. I felt all funny inside, like you feel when the fantods get you after pickles and whiskey, but I stayed with it all that day. At least

I was sure seein' things from the inside.

Near twilight, Side come up and rode with me, and I knew he was satisfied with the way I'd been actin', and that it was all right now, I needn't bear watching.

Streckfus had his paw up in the air, just down-crest from a ridge, and Side and me stopped and waited.

Then Streckfus waved us up, and we threw off and crawled to the crest and saw it mebbe three-four miles down. "Lindner's," Streckfus whispered, like he was already in hearing of the place.

Lindner's was under cottonwoods, but it had box corrals and fencin' that was like silver strings in the sun-fall. The herd was over a draw, grazin'.

"Lindner's hands are over at Benteen's," Side whispered. "They's just Lindner here, an' a cook an' a night guard."

I had to figure that Lindner's hands was over at Benteen's 'cause Benteen thought he was going to get hit, and had sent out for help. Sure neat, the way Side and Streckfus had it fixed.

It come in dark, and when Streckfus uncorked his flask, he passed it around three ways. We rode down easy and quiet, keepin' downwind of the herd, and pretty soon we could hear the night guard hummin' to the cows. The plan tonight was to carve, not rush. We'd cut out a portion and run it off, not try for the whole herd. I didn't find out why till next morning.

Streckfus clipped the wire off four posts, to give us a wide chute, and then we sickled in fast and separated mebbe forty head and whacked 'em toward the chute. The guard come flyin' at us and Streckfus let go one round and the guard come high off his saddle with his hands crossed on his shirt buttons, like he'd been plugged in the stomach. We heard later that he had been.

We threw the drive right at the chute and poured 'em through and Side heaved himself onto one flank and I took the

other, while Streckfus closed on the drag. And then somethin' come to them cows, I don't yet know what, and they swayed off-course and bumped and collided and started my way and I heard horns clickin' and noses gaspin' and then I went deaf and lost my bit. My pony started millin' on all fours and then showed his free teeth and plunged diagonal across the herd, me on him and about to get torn apart.

Only thing I could think of was to draw and fire and try to split 'em and let 'em pass on each side of me. But I fumbled the draw and the cows was atop me. I was tryin' to think of somethin' to tell God, when around comes Side with the speed of a tossed knife and has my bridle and drags me clear. The herd went past and their backwash pulled my pony's tail sideways. We run down and goaded 'em and turned 'em north, only not to where we'd been.

"Little Box," Side told me later. It was small, as canyons come, but it was in high country and reached by rocks, and the drive didn't leave a mark. Then he told me they were carving because they were reversin' the usual procedure. Instead of runnin' a whole herd, they were cuttin' out parcels and hidin' 'em all over the hills. That way, they could later hair-brand 'em and make up a big herd and drive it anyplace, and nobody who'd lost but twenty-thirty cows could tell them nay.

I was tryin' to think of a way to thank Side, but nothing'd come. That was when he said, "Red, I know what you're thinkin', but don't say it. Mebbe you can do the same for me someday."

Streckfus looked at us resentful like, as if I should've been chopped to pieces and Side with me. He didn't say nothin', just bent to the coffee.

"By tomorrow," Side told me, "all the hands at Benteen's'll be back at Lindners. So then we help ourselves to Benteen's. He'll leave one, two, three men only."

I was in the play deeper than I'd supposed I would be, and things were shapin' up mighty different. "Where do we take Benteen's?"

"Cedar Box," Side said. "It's big enough to hold forty head, and they's more forage than most places. These folks all think we're a big gang, an' that they don't have enough men to follow us down." He switched his eyes to Streckfus. "But they ain't goin' to think it long, which is why I say, let's quit."

Streckfus stared at him over a coffee cup. "Quit?" It was nasty.

There was evidence that we'd all quit, come next day, but I couldn't say so.

"Quit, I say." Side flipped a smoke together. "We got enough dollars on the hoof now—from Lindner's and Harrison's, let alone what Benteen's'll bring. Let's pay off Manuel, like I said before, an' run the drive over The Line."

Manuel was their herder. He was supposed to be in Crooked Pass now, lookin' after the Harrison drive. Then he'd slip down here to Little Box, then go up to Cedar, after the stuff from Benteen's was in. That saved Streckfus and Side from havin' to tend cows. Neat.

Streckfus finished his coffee. "Let's handle Benteen first."

"Tonight?"

He dropped his cup. "Tonight!" He said it like they'd argued about it some, and wanted no more.

Side turned to me. "Red, you ready for the big job?"

Well, sir, you can't run out on the friend who saved your life. "If we got work to do, let's finish it." I felt like I could have done the thing alone, I'd learned so much of the method.

Me and Side and Streckfus took turn-about that day, watchin' the lower country from the rim of Little Box, and come dark, we saddled and prepared. A little Mexkin come down around star-time and touched his hat and grinned. Manuel.

Streckfus told him to tend here, then meet us at Cedar Box before dawn. Manuel watched me all that time, like he didn't trust me. He wore a knife in a scabbard and he hauled a gun with a tin finish on the butt. Hock shop scrollwork.

We hadn't gone a mile when Side and Streckfus busted into an argument. Side was even willin' to forget Benteen and quit now and get over The Line and play it straight a while, but Streckfus got mean in the mouth and made a few references to unfinished business. "It's a point of honor," Streckfus said. "I feel Benteen owes us that stock already, we been planin' to rustle it for so long."

Side told him, "They's no honor 'mong rustlers."

And after about a mile of travel Streckfus mumbled, "No, I guess there ain't."

We were closin' onto Benteen's out-ranges now and movin' at a walk, Streckfus leadin', me and Side spread wide at the rear. That afternoon we'd seen dust goin' from Benteen's to Lindner's, which could've meant that the hands was movin' that way. Or not.

It might've been breeze, or strays, or a mail rig.

UNDER full dark we trailed west along Benteen's north fence, and pretty soon Streckfus handed his reins to Side and crawled through the wire and vanished for a look-see and a feel-out. Side was tryin' to get somethin' out again, I could tell it by the way he kept makin' throat noises and lookin' away. Then he cleared his throat a coupla times. "Y'know, Red," he said, "this ain't my business."

"No?" I found his face in the dark. "You seem pretty good at it."

"Y'learn, after a while. But you don't have to stay learnt." He had trouble with his tongue for awhile. "Nawssir, I want to sign off. They's a store over The Line I want to buy. 'Quipment, an' all that."

He grinned some. "They's a girl, too."

He didn't come with nothin' more, so I moved in. "How'd you get connected?"

"With Streckfus? Well, he had him a deal and I needed clinkers to get that 'quipment layout I met him down in The Brazos a few months ago." Side swallowed, and I heard it creak. "But I never packed any iron, nawssir."

Streckfus come back and took his horse. "Empty. Two hands singin' away south of the herd. Everyone else's at Lindner's. Come on." He had the fence clipped and was through it while we sat there. We curved in fast like we'd done at Lindner's, and Streckfus cuts in for forty head and whoops 'em toward the chute and Side and me post on each side of it and fan our hats at the rushin' horns. This time I remembered to keep short rein. I'd settle with Streckfus first, then talk to Side.

Then the night opened up with what sounded like First Bull Run. They was comin' out've draws and out from behind cottonwoods and their guns was cracklin' like the biggest bonfire you ever heard and Side and me was puttin' our ponies into the open with our chins to the mane-whips. Streckfus come through ten feet off the ground and we three lined out dead north and to hell with the rustle. Let Benteen keep it. Streckfus hollered, "Spread! Throw 'em off! Meet at Cedar!" He was firin'.

His shot clapped and the bullet chewed the hairs off my ear, and that's when it clapped again and I heard a thud and saw Side cartwheel off and drop behind. Streckfus was whirlin' west into a wild draw and I was at northeast with the herd behind me, crazy from gunnin'. And behind them come the Benteen crowd, tryin' to flank the cows and start 'em circlin'.

I got away and pushed into high country until the sounds below were mighty dim. Benteen was circlin' his herd the last I saw it, and he couldn't have lost any of 'em. I pushed into rocks until my knees

was soaked with pony-foam, and then I pulled down and took account. My ear was burnin' where that bullet had ticked it, but that was the least of it. Side had got it full and final. I'd seen his animal pump out west after Streckfus. The whole herd must've gone over him, and I figured that was good, 'cause no one would identify him, and embarrass that girl down over The Line by taggin' her fee-ancy a rustler.

Like Streckfus had allowed, there ain't no honor in the trade, so it's best not to be known as havin' consorted with it.

I took care of my pony, and got some air back into his lungs and lifted his hooves and rubbed him some. And when it was gettin' gray overhead, I followed out the passes, figurin' where Streckfus would be headin'. A nelephant could've hid in those draws and cutbacks, but I didn't have to search for this Streckfus, 'cause I knew where he'd be.

I was between him and Cedar Box at dawn. No one was down in the canyon but Manuel, and he was asleep with his hands behind his hat and his boots crossed in front of him. I put my pony on a pin in the bushes and sat down trail-side and pushed my hat back, so's the brim wouldn't interfere with the business at hand, and I left my gun under leather. I figured that Side would want it that way.

Pretty soon he come up the rocks on foot, pullin' his horse behind him. He didn't see me for a minute, though I intended that he should. His head was down and he was sweatin' some, so I said, pleasant and polite, "Mornin', Streckfus."

He come up like a hammer had hit him underneath. He went cold all over, like he was seein' a ghost, and I guess he thought he was. He went after his gun, but I'd already figured he'd do that.

You can't save the life of the man who ran out on your friend. But I had to give him the chance to draw, which is some-

(Continued on page 128)

GIANT OF THE SIERRAS

By M. KANE



*Bigger than the Sierras was Snowshoe Thompson, who
licked one of the West's worst killers without a weapon
—other than courage!*

QUITE incidentally, the opening of the transcontinental railroad ended the career of a far less demanding public servant—a volunteer mountain postman named John Thompson, who carried the mails over the Sierras on his back for twelve winters, alone.

Born in Norway, brought to this country at the age of ten, and attracted to the California goldfields in his early twenties, Thompson never lost his feeling for the mountain trails. The fjords of his boyhood, the Sierras of his young manhood, were always his second home. He had given up prospecting and settled on a ranch at Putah Creek, when he heard about the government's difficulties in conducting a postal service between California and Carson Valley.

At that time, the high Sierras in winter were a dreaded thing. To be trapped there meant almost certain death. It had been a situation avoided even by the mountain men, more than a generation

earlier—and many were the harrowing tales still current about tardy emigrants who had dawdled too long on the overland trail only to be caught within a few miles of the Sacramento Valley by the mountain snows.

John Thompson, not yet thirty, looked up at the white peaks. Other men, he knew, could get lost there, wander and perish. He knew, because it had happened. But it could not have happened to Thompson. He knew his way in the mountains.

Remembering his boyhood in Norway, he fashioned a crude pair of skis and a ski pole from the green timber on his own land. They were heavy—twenty-five pounds when he weighed the finished product—but he figured they would hold him on the surface of the snow. Then he went to Placerville, where they had a post office on the west slope of the mountain range, and said he would be glad to carry

(Continued on page 124)

Side by side they fought down that crimson trail, the last longhorn and the last Texan, pledged in undying loyalty to a bitter choice—

KILL-OR DIE!

By KENNETH FOWLER



He threw the bunched power of his body into a driving clout at Burch's jaw. . . .

WILL BLACKMON felt an undefinable foreboding, watching the two riders. They had swung down off the trail, now, and were quartering towards the little shake-roofed cabin he had finished building just the week before. He hadn't had a chance yet to scythe

out the knee-deep gramma that grew untrampled almost to his front door, and the stirrups of the two horses, a *grulla* and a big claybank, barely cleared its feathery tops as the animals plowed through.

Now Blackmon pulled his attention

completely from the axe he was honing on an old foot-treadle grindstone. One of the riders he recognized as Malvin Burch, who ran a little siwash outfit here in the valley, east of his own spread. Burch wasn't a tall man, but from hips to shoulders he was built like a block of hickory.

When he had first come here to Spoon Valley he and Burch had discussed merging their spreads and going partners. But they had been unable to see eye on certain things. Then Madge Harper had stepped into the picture. Madge was teacher to the ranch kids who attended the little schoolhouse down at Sawgash Forks. And he and Burch were in a dead-heat race to tack a "Mrs." in front of her name.

Blackmon's gaze swiveled suddenly to the man Burch was with, and he didn't like what he saw. The two riders offered a study in contrasts—Burch blond, medium tall, thick set, his companion lanky and rawboned, with black, Indian-coarse hair that made a ragged fringe around the collar of his blue linsey-woolsey shirt.

The pair pulled up their horses in front of the grindstone, and Burch spoke first.

"Howdy," Burch said. "Will, want you to meet Clee Hackaby."

Blackmon acknowledged the introduction with a nod. "Howdy," he said. "Light down and rest your saddles. Cold water up at the spring house, if you'd like a drink."

Hackaby grunted. "This ain't no social visit, Blackmon." He had tight black eyes, scrounged behind a network of fan-shaped wrinkles. He aimed his dour glance at Blackmon. "We come to warn you," he said. "We heard you're runnin' scrub bulls in your herd. If that's so, you better root 'em out now, or they'll be shot out."

Blackmon's cool, ash-gray eyes narrowed, shuttling inquiringly towards Burch.

Burch spoke reluctantly. "This is how you want to make it, Will," he said in a faintly apologetic tone. "We don't want our stuff gettin' mixed up with your longhorn bulls, is all."

"It won't," said Blackmon tersely. "My bulls aren't with the herd. They're fenced in."

"A fence is no good," Hackaby shot out. "A bull could bust through a fence right easy."

"Not through any fence I build," said Blackmon evenly.

With a cranky rein-jerk, Hackaby swung his claybank. His curt glance swung at Burch. "Comin', Mal?"

Mal Burch shook his head. "Not yet." His glance was held thoughtfully on Blackmon.

"Then I ain't wastin' no more time on this jeesley palaver," snapped Hackaby. His black eyes pinpointed Blackmon. "Remember," he said. "Root 'em out or we shoot 'em out," and with that, he started his horse back through the trampled gramma.

Burch swung down from his grulla. "Met him on the trail, Will," he said conciliatingly. "I aimed to talk to you about this alone."

"Thought Hackaby spoke your piece, Mal."

Burch looked uncomfortable. "This is a question of breed, Will. I'm aimin' to raise cross-breds myself. Up north here, everybody's crossin' Texas cows with Durham bulls. You'd have to be a hawk-eye to spot any Texas blood in the result."

"So what's wrong with Texas blood?" asked Blackmon softly.

A stiff grin pinched in Burch's mouth. "I'm talkin' about cow blood, mister. Me, I like Texans."

"We'd ought to git along, then. Except Texas longhorns are the only steers worth grass, in my opinion."

Burch frowned. "It's agin' Col'rada

law, Will, to let any Texas or scrub bull run at large. Any such found, the law allows to be shot."

Blackmon pitched a long leg back from the grindstone. He stood looking at Burch with gray-flint eyes. "You'd shoot mine, I suppose, if they broke fence."

"I'd have to, Will."

"I wouldn't ever try it, Mal."

Their glances crossed, clashed, came apart. Burch sighed and gathered up the reins of the *grulla*. "I hope this never gets beyond talk with us, Will. Well, drop over to my place when you get a chance."

"Mebbe we'll meet again in town, Mal."

Burch laughed. "Madge Harper, eh? I'm aimin' to beat your time there, Will, if I can."

A wry grin puckered Blackmon's mouth. "No Col'rada law agin' your tryin' it, Mal. Mebbe, though, you better just count on bein' the best man."

They parted on this basis of amicable truce, but Blackmon noticed a grim set to his neighbor's jaw as Burch rode away.

The cabin still held an aromatic redolence of fresh-hewn pine, and as Blackmon stepped across the threshold into its raw, new emptiness a pang of loneliness swept him. *Needs some foofooraw; a woman's touch*, he thought, and had his moment of secret dream, visioning a frilly curtain at the front window, a hooked rug laid across the puncheon floor. Inevitably, then, Madge Harper came into his thoughts, and he let the dream run on.

Abruptly, he swung around and went on into his lean-to kitchen, where he'd left a pot of coffee simmering on his little wood-burning cook stove. He broke a sourdough biscuit, popped a chunk of jerky between the crusty halves, then poured himself a mug of coffee. He ate abstractedly, with little awareness of any taste to the food, and the moment he

was finished dropped the mug into a pan of dishwater and went outside.

HIS sorrel saddler was corraled out back of the kitchen, and he saddled, mounted, and started on a fence run along his west boundary. He cut no sign, nor saw anything suspicious, and when he reached the point where his line adjoined Burch's on the west, and Hackaby's to the north, he found his two Texas bulls safe behind the bars of the sturdy basswood pens he had built for them.

He had, at this moment, the hindsight wish that he might have built the pens a little closer to his own cabin. From talk he'd heard in town, Clee Hackaby was a man to be watched.

The thought gave Blackmon a rising uneasiness as he rode back along the fence. Six months ago he'd headed north with a herd of longhorns. During the War of the Rebellion, they'd run wild through the Panhandle, and were any man's for the gathering. Under a shares deal with his trail herd crew, he'd brought his gathering to Abilene, sold out there, and then had drifted west to Julesburg, looking for a location where he could start a little iron of his own. Finally, here in Spoon Valley, he'd found this place, which had good grass, and an unfailing supply of creek water, in case he ever wanted to irrigate. Out of his original herd, he'd kept a hundred head and two good Texas bulls, for breeding stock.

He was almost to the cabin before he noticed the buckboard drawn up in front of the door; then, with a start of surprise, he saw that the driver was Madge Harper. She had never been out to look at his place before, and her presence here now gave him a sudden strong feeling of elation. He held the sensation until he came up beside the buckboard and pulled rein; at that moment he belatedly became aware that she was star-

ing up at him with a curious tenseness.

"School can't be out this early." His eyes searched her slim, delicately boned face, wind-whipped to an apple-bright red by the November rawness of the day. "Anything wrong, Madge?"

A green muffler was drawn tight over her glossy black hair, knotted becomingly under her chin. "I guess not, Will. I hope not, anyway." Her brown eyes had a warm, misted look, as her smile went up to him. "Even schoolmarms get a day off on Saturday, you know."

He grinned sheepishly. "I plumb forgot." Dismounting, he stepped up to the buckboard. "Come inside? I'll make some coffee. Thaw you out for the trip back."

"I'd like to, Will. But I've got to get back. The school board's meeting, and I have to—" She stopped suddenly. "Will, I won't waste time. Clee Hackaby was in town yesterday, trying to stir up trouble about those bulls of yours. I—I thought if you didn't know—"

"I know, all right." Blackmon's voice was grim, suddenly. "Hackabay and Burch were here this mornin'."

"Will, why don't you get rid of those bulls? You'll be in trouble with the law if they break out, and Mal says they can't compare with Durhams."

"That's Mal's opinion. It ain't mine."

"You're just being stubborn about it!"

His slow grin teased her. "And that's your opinion. Some things a Texan's

stubborn about, though. Like courtin', for instance. What time will I pick you up for that charivari at Kriedemaker's next Saturday?"

"Stubborn," Madge Harper said, "and vain as a peacock! Mal's asked me to the dance too, you know."

Blackmon's mouth built into a wry twist. "I'll give him a message for you. Explainin' why you can't go with him."

"You'd better not! You take too many things for granted, Will Blackmon!"

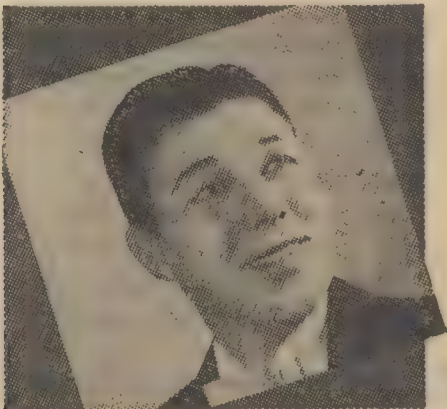
"You've got me mixed up with some other feller," grinned Blackmon.

"Oh, have I?" With a sudden exasperated gesture, Madge Harper leaned forward and unwound her reins from the whipstock. Straightening, she gave him a changed, sober look. "Be careful about Hackaby, Will."

"I will." Then, "Say about eight o'clock Saturday, for the Kreidemakers'?"

"I'll have to consult my crystal ball." For an instant, her dark eyes mocked him, half amused, then she said, "Adios, Will," and tooled the team of blacks out into the wheel ruts leading up to the main trail.

For a long moment he stood motionless, his eyes following the buckboard's spinning wheels with an abstracted stare. She'd made a ten-mile ride out here to the valley, just to warn him. *Be careful about Hackaby, Will.* A woman would have a pretty strong feeling for a man



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to go to all that bother. The thought fanned a fresh spark of hope in him.

He reached for the sorrel's bridle reins. As he did, his glance caught on an envelope lying in the wheel tracks left by the buckboard. A twice-folded sheet of note paper protruded from the envelope. Stooping, Blackmon saw that the envelope was addressed to Madge; maybe, he thought idly, a letter from her sister, Janet, in Julesburg. He had his hand on the letter when a gust of wind scooped up the envelope and sent it fluttering away.

Absently, he stuffed the letter into his shirt pocket.

A feeble sun was just breaking over the rim of the East Bench the next morning, when Blackmon rode out on the sorrel for a check of his small herd, which was grazing on the rich gramma down in his creek bottomlands. Arriving there, he studied the steers and was forced to admit they looked a bit scrubby.

The reflection gave him no genuine feeling of reassurance, he found, and riding on, a nagging doubt gnawed at him. He set his mind against it, and presently was quartering towards the foot of the bench, where his bull pens were situated. A brushy ridge blocked his view of the pens momentarily; coming up over it, he checked back on the reins suddenly, drawing to a startled halt. A gaping hole met his gaze where two of the pens' deep-sunk oak-posts had been uprooted. One entire link of the basswood fence had been battered down, and the bulls were gone!

A deep anger burned through Blackmon, replacing his first stunned sensation of shock. For a short moment he sat rigid in the saddle, staring down bleakly at the wrecked fence. Then, with a last glowering look, he swung the sorrel and headed around in the direction of the bulls' clearly defined tracks. Those bulls had never fence-crawled before.

Still, there was a possibility that might have spooked and crashed out. Suddenly he remembered Clee Hackaby's words. *You'd better root 'em out or they'll be shot out.*

A PUZZLED frown crimped a corner of Blackmon's mouth. He had only a vague realization of having forded the creek, but now, glancing up, he saw he was riding over onto Mal Burch's grass. He and Burch had almost identical layouts—good valley land and well-watered grass, where a man could grow almost anything he was a mind to. Passing a fenced strip Burch had put to corn, a wry grimace twisted Blackmon's jaw. Durham crosses had to be corn-fed, which was another thing he didn't like about the damned breed. A Texas longhorn, on the other hand, never needed anything but good sweet grass to fill its gut on.

Presently he passed a herd of Burch's cows grazing in a little cup of the valley, off to his left, and had to admit they looked pretty lardy, for cross-breds. A half hour later, still following the clear tracks of the bulls, he reached a narrow draw which wound up crookedly towards a high, grassy ridge. He was paused here, studying the sign, when the sound of a shot jerked him taut. The shot sounded as if it had come from the ridge, and spurring the sorrel, Blackmon headed for the rise at a reaching gallop.

At the crest the sorrel reared abruptly and Blackmon pulled it down. Then he saw the bull. Blood trickled sluggishly where the bullet had ripped into its right ear. It lay flopped over on its side in the tall grass, dead.

Ahead, the trail dipped down again. A cold fury stung Blackmon as he hooked the sorrel. A hundred yards farther on he saw the other bull, wallowing around in a slough at the foot of a cutbank. He saw something else—Mal Burch,

sitting his hip-shot *grulla* at the rim of the slough, sunlight striking a blue glitter from the gun seated in his chunky fist.

Blackmon let out a yell and at the same instant roweled the sorrel. Burch didn't even turn his head. Deliberately, he leveled the gun and fired. The bull's forelegs crumpled. It fell thrashing.

Reaching Burch, Blackmon slammed into him with a violence that sent the shorter man toppling out of his saddle. Then, as Burch reeled to his feet, Blackmon stood in stirrups, swung a leg back over the cantle, and jumped. He was taller than his neighbor, six-foot-two of gristled bone and muscle, but in Mal Burch's burly frame there was power to match it. He hit Burch slantwise, jarring him around without downing him. Then, before Burch could recover fully, he pitched two clouting blows at him and felt the second strike squarely.

If it stunned Burch, he didn't show it. A frozen grin adhered briefly to his blocky jaw; then he crouched and came under Blackmon's flailing arms, throwing a punch at his belly, and another, an abrupt uppercut, at his unguarded chin. The belly blow pounded the breath out of Blackmon; the clout on the chin exploded up through his head like shooting fire, and he stumbled back, off balance, and fell sprawling.

Burch stepped back, regarding him with a cool and steady attention as he rocked up to his feet, panting. A grudging admiration reached up in Blackmon.

"You had me down, Burch. Why didn't you finish me?"

Out of breath himself, Burch spoke in jerky gasps. "Don't count a man licked till he stays down, Blackmon. This is a damn fool business anyway, but if you want more, come and git it."

"You didn't have to shoot those bulls." Anger swelled freshly back into Blackmon.

Burch shrugged. "To hell with scrub bulls. They was just a pair of scrubby ol' Texas windbellies."

Blackmon wasted no more breath. With grim deliberateness, he shuffled forward, ducked Burch's jerky swing, then, feinting to the belt line, threw the whole bunched power of his rawboned body into a driving clout to the point of the man's jaw.

The terrific concussion of the blow split the skin on his knuckles, and a savage elation swept him as he saw Burch wobble. But Burch recovered quickly; doggedly, his mouth a bloody crack through which a stiff grin still showed, he drove back at Blackmon in a bull-like rush, and for a minute they stood toe to toe, slugging at each other with an absorbed and reckless fury.

One of Burch's hooking blows reached Blackmon's mouth and gave the taste of blood to his tongue; he fell against Burch, his left arm handlocking under Burch's armpit, his right blurring up in a leg-powered drive from the knees. The blow was straight up, and struck like a sledge under Burch's chin. Burch bent at the knees and his eyes glazed, but he didn't go down.

Blackmon's body sagged under the weight of a tremendous fatigue; he stared at Burch with a heavy surprise as Burch's loglike legs amazingly stiffened, as he staggered forward and threw a punch that skidded off Blackmon's cheek without force, like a tired slap. With a lethargic movement, Blackmon pressed both his hands against Burch's chest and heaved; then, trembling with exhaustion, he weaved forward and got up his right hand and smashed Burch listlessly in the mouth.

Burch seemed to float away from him and fall in a rosy haze. Then his own knees buckled, and he sank down on them.

Blackmon stared at him dully, then

lurched around and walked dragglingly to the sorrel. He had no clear recollection of hoisting himself into the saddle, of swinging the horse and starting back towards his own side of the creek.

Halfway there, he saw one of Burch's Durham bulls grazing in a clump of gramma, fifty yards from a herd of cross-breds, pastured beyond. He rode up to it and shot it. Reining around, he had a brief sight of a rider skylined against the west bench; almost instantly the rider sheered off and disappeared, and he wondered vaguely if it could have been Hackaby.

Back at his own place, Blackmon went into the cabin the moment he had corraled the sorrel and flopped down on his bunk, too dogged out even to pull off his boots. He sank quickly into a sleep of total exhaustion.

The darkness of the room was altering to a pallid dawn-gray when his eyes peeled open. He had a foggy half-consciousness of a sound of shod hooves going away, and realized it was that sound which must have awakened him. He swung his legs down from the bunk and stretched. His head throbbed dully, and his bruised, puffy jaws held a steady ache.

He struck a match and lighted the lantern which stood on a sawbuck table beside the bunk. Still fuzzy-eyed, he stared at the silver stemwinder suspended from a wooden peg above his pillow. It was ten minutes past five. Walking across to the door, he unbolted it and stepped out into a quick invigoration from the crisp air. At that moment, memory of the fight flooded back on him, and he was conscious of a sudden depressed feeling. What would happen now? Under Colorado law, Mal Burch had been fully within his rights in killing those Texas bulls. But legally, he'd had no right to shoot Burch's Durham. Burch would be on the prod now, for sure.

And Madge. Now that he thought

about it, it seemed strange that she'd made so little mention of Burch, when she'd been here yesterday. Was that because she had wanted to keep this trouble confined to Hackaby and himself, so that Burch would safely be left out of it?

A feeling of acute depression settled on him as he turned to reenter the cabin. And at that moment he noticed something tacked to his front door, and bending down saw that it was a note of some kind, scrawled crudely on a ragged strip of paper bagging.

A sense of premonition darted through him as he took it inside and held it under the lantern light. His breath caught as he read the bold, perpendicular script:

Blackmon:

No maverick Texan can come on this range and shoot a Durham. This time we'll settle it with guns. You got the guts, I'll be waiting for you at the rock spring, west bench, 7 o'clock.

M. BURCH

A cold vacancy tightened Blackmon's eyes as he read the note through a second time. Then, his mouth pressed in a dour frown, he walked out to the kitchen and set about preparations for breakfast.

It was exactly six-thirty when he saddled the sorrel and headed towards Dead Creek. Reaching the watercourse, he swung west. He regretted now the angry impulse that had led him to shoot one of Burch's bulls, but the regret had nothing to do with fear. What irked him particularly was the nagging knowledge that he was in the wrong on this thing. His bulls had been at large, and Burch had had the legal right to shoot them. But the law protected a Durham. He'd had no right to kill Burch's bull.

He was halfway up the west bench when he slowed suddenly. The rock spring wasn't too far distant from him now; even from here he could see the top rims of the boulders that made a strong natural fortification around it. Guardedly, he ad-

vanced to the narrow ridge that made a rocky spine along the bench, some thirty yards above him. Here he dismounted and drew his Winchester out of its saddle boot.

He looked around. Twenty yards forward along the ridge was a big oak deadfall, with fair cover leading up to it. He reached it without incident and was just hunkering down when the spurting whine of a rifle bullet ripped the stillness, and punk from the deadfall splattered into his face.

Instantly a voice whipped down at him from the high ground above. "That was your warning, Blackmon! From here out, you're on your own!"

BLACKMON located the voice as coming from the rocky parapet, up by the spring. He braced the Winchester against the deadfall and fired. There was no answering shot. Higher up on the bench, a pair of jays chattered noisily. No other sound but a faint rustling of leaves broke the ominously widening silence.

After five minutes of this, Blackmon felt a gnawing impatience. Had Burch moved? Cautiously cradling the Winchester, he crawled to the opposite butt of the big log. Here, a stand of willow brush afforded a flimsy cover. Bellied down, he peered out through its leafy interstices. No movement. No sound, now, anywhere.

The brush, Blackmon noticed now, coursed down from here towards a narrow dry wash, where Autumn rains had gouged a deep channel in the sandy soil. The channel ran at a slight down-slant to another big deadfall, some fifty feet beyond his present position. Maybe he could catch a better look at things, from down there. Flattening out, he crawled out from the log butt, into the gully. He was halfway to the deadfall when a shot cracked and sand spurted into his eyes. Head pillowed against his outthrust arm, he lay utterly motionless. Silence closed in again.

Blackmon estimated a minute, and when nothing happened pushed his rifle out ahead of him and cautiously inched forward again. Instantly a second shot drove at him, and he felt a stabbing burn across his left hip.

Then he knew. Mal Burch had shifted to higher ground; he was probably hunkered up back of that rimrock, twenty or thirty feet above the rock spring.

It was certain, now, that he couldn't stay here. But if he started crawling forward again, Burch would certainly tack him down. His only chance would be to take Burch by surprise. He measured the distance to the deadfall; ten, maybe fifteen yards. He picked up a small rock and tossed it. Burch fired. Ten feet ahead, the bullet snipped leaves from a wild horse-mint.

Blackmon picked up another rock. The



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trick now would be to make Burch think he was backtracking. He tossed the rock behind him. It crashed in a little motte of willow brush, and as Burch fired again, Blackmon sprang up and raced for the deadfall.

He was four yards short of it when the rifle on the rimrock gave out another flat crack. Something cuffed at Blackmon's boot and he tripped and fell sprawling. Then he was behind the deadfall, breathing hard, his heart sending slow, irregular blows against the tight drum of his chest.

Carefully, he pulled out his shirttail and stared at the moist red track where Burch's bullet had scored his hip. Close, that. But he was in a better spot, now.

A shot slammed down from the rock, fanning bark from the deadfall. At the same instant, Blackmon's glance caught on a scrap of something white, lying at his feet. He reached down and saw it was the letter Madge Harper had dropped, the day she'd driven up to his place in the buckboard. Apparently the fall he'd taken had jounced it out of his pocket.

Suddenly Blackmon stiffened, staring down at the name, "Mal Burch," penned at the bottom of the sheet. Quickly, he spread the note open before him and started reading:

Dear Madge:

Good luck to you and the Johnny Reb.
And thanks for letting me down easy.

You might do me one favor, though, and introduce me to Janet when she takes your place at the school. If Janet's your twin, I aim to get my foot in the door early, this time.

With sincere good wishes,

MAL BURCH

The words of the letter seemed to blur before Blackmon's eyes as he continued staring at them in stunned disbelief. *Good luck to you and the Johnny Reb.* Dazedly, he looked at the date on the letter. It had been written the day before Madge had driven out to the cabin to see him. Likely enough, she'd been going to tell him then, but he'd acted so plumb cocky—

Staring down at Mal Burch's neat, slanted script, Blackmon tensed suddenly. The handwriting of this note didn't remotely resemble the heavy, perpendicular writing of the note he'd found tacked on his door this morning! Mal Burch hadn't sent him that challenge!

Abruptly, Blackmon let out a yell. "Mal? Hold your fire up there! I'm callin' for a time out!"

Mal Burch's grimly weighted voice floated down from the rimrock. "You're callin' the time, but I'm callin' the tune, Blackmon! Pitch your rifle out over that deadfall, you want to parley."

Without a moment's hesitation, Blackmon threw it up, high and out, so Burch could see the sunlight flash on its spinning blue barrel.

"Burch! You see that?"

"All right," Burch called back tersely. "Now come up, but let's see your hands first."

Blackmon thrust up his arms. Then, slowly, he came to his feet. He still had his Walker .45 holstered at his hip, but he couldn't possibly have used it at this distance, and Burch would know that. His breath went out in a relieved gust as he saw Burch step watchfully out from the rimrock, his big Sharps raised, ready. Then Burch started walking towards him. When he was less than ten yards from the deadfall, Burch let the butt of his Sharps bump to the ground.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated.

Wordlessly, Blackmon paced forward to meet him, the challenge note outthrust in his hand.

"This was tacked to my door," he said grimly. "I've got a sneakin' hunch you're totin' one just like it, Mal."

Burch read the note, then, slowly, his eyes lifted from it and he whistled softly.

"Same writin' as on mine," he muttered in a dazed voice. "And if that ain't some of Clee Hackaby's handiwork I'll be a—" He stopped suddenly, his glance shifting

from Blackmon with a jerky alertness. "Look down there," he said, and made a stiff-fingered point with his right hand.

Burch's gesture was downward, towards the valley, and following it Blackmon made out a long, swirling dust haze.

He became conscious of Burch's eyes aimed grimly back at him. "We've been played for a pair of suckers, Will. Those'll be our steers Hackaby's drivin' off down there."

Blackmon's voice was low, meager. "Your horse handy, Mal?"

"Up back of the spring."

"Let's git slopin'," Blackmon said.

He was almost to the spot where he had thrown the Winchester when the shot crashed and he had an alarmed corner-eyed glimpse of Burch plunging down, ten yards to his left.

The rider up there on the ridge was too sure, and for an instant he was skylined, and Blackmon threw up the rifle and fired. He heard another shot that was like a pouncing echo of his own, and with coincident suddenness saw the dry-gulcher tip and go sliding down out of his saddle.

"Think I got him, Will," Burch called.

"No," Blackmon said, "I did."

"Fetch your horse," Burch said.

Five minutes later, when Blackmon reached the ridge with the sorrel, Burch was already there on his grulla, staring down at a limp, crumpled body, sprawled in the brush.

Burch nodded down. "Big surprise," he said. "Clee Hackaby. Two bulletholes in his head."

Blackmon grinned. "I must've shot twice without knowin' it."

"I was with Burnside at Bull Run. Sharpshooter," Burch said.

"Stonewall Jackson was my boss," drawled Blackmon. "Had a few tol'ble sharpshooters ourselves."

"Heard tell." Burch pushed the Sharps down in his saddle scabbard; his blue eyes lining on Blackmon held a sudden gravity.

"Hackaby wasn't takin' no chances with us, was he?"

Blackmon shook his head. "Seems like a heap of trouble he went to, for just a couple hundred head of beef."

"It wasn't the beef so much," Burch said. "Hackaby's land up there on the east bench ain't any good for corn, and cross-breds have to be corn fed a lot. He was after our valley land."

"Powerful waste of corn," remarked Blackmon, "feedin' it to beef critters."

"How you look at it." Burch's glance had been following the dust cloud, but now he looked back at Blackmon, his blue eyes crinkling quizzically. "I still got a good pair of Durhams left," he mentioned idly. "Loan you one, you'd like to build up some fat stuff from the herd of scrubs you been runnin'."

A slow grin cracked Will Blackmon's mouth. "I noticed some of your cows yesterday, Mal. They did look middlin'—for Northern cross-breds."

Mal Burch's gaze was pointed off down-valley again, towards the dust haze. "That'll be Hank Deeds and Spanish Moll-lick," he murmured, "hazin' those critters. Pair of no-goods been workin' for Hackaby. I don't guess they'll git too far, do you?"

They swung their horses in one blended movement. "Don't reckon," said Blackmon.

After a minute, Burch, leading their ride down off the bench, glanced back across his shoulder. "Drop over tomorrow, you want a loan of that bull."

"Tomorrow'd be a bad day for me, Mal. I've got to be in town."

"Come to think of it, so do I. New schoolmarm's comin' in, I understand."

"Hope we can hold her," Blackmon murmured.

"You better leave the holdin' to me this time, *amigo*."

Blackmon grinned at him. Burch was right. He better had.



Above the roar of the raging torrent he hurled back a dead man's challenge—"You'll have to give two lives to get mine, lawman—and one of them will be your own!"

They went down together, the weapon locked between them. . . .

GUNLIGHT CROSSING

By RAY TOWNSEND

THE stage swayed down the last winding loop of the grade, lurching ahead at a quicker pace as the driver kicked loose the brake and bawled at his

team. "Hi-yi! Bessie! Lou! Gee, there! Gee, girl, gee!" The great wheels slammed through the puddled ruts, the hoofs of the team splattering the coach and passengers

with a solid plaster of mud, to add to the drizzle.

Thrown half upright from his seat inside, Will Duncan jarred abruptly back. He felt his weight slam into the girl, his knees jab the back of the man on the floor. He smiled apologetically, seeing the pale, strained look of her face as she clung to the window sill. The three men in front had linked arms against the bounding of the stage. Will settled as best he could, hearing the deep laughter from the man on his right.

"Be hittin' the river soon," he said. He was a square, hard man of fifty; name of Boone. "Be a layover there. Longer'n we like, if she's up too high." He leaned over Will.

"Warm, clean place at Purdy's," he said. "Brand, spankin' new. You'll get good food and a chance to rest up some, ma'am. Be an hour, even if the ferry's runnin' all right."

Miss Laura Carroll smiled her thanks, her shoulder striking Will's as they took another jolt. Will said, "Maybe you'd better lay over until tomorrow, ma'am. You're looking right ill."

"No!" Again he saw the look of urgency in the quick glance she gave him. He had noticed it before.

"I have to reach Jordan Creek tonight," she said, "on this stage! I can't stop over!"

Will Duncan had seen Miss Laura Carroll's eyes upon him in the lobby of the hotel at Boise. Waiting for the stage, he had turned and had accidentally surprised this same look of worried insecurity in her face. She had looked quickly away.

At Purdy's ferry the driver slammed his weight against the brake. The coach slued to a halt, slathering mud and puddle water across the uneven yard. "Hi-yi! Purdy's!" Luke Gredna yelled down from the boot. "Freshments and vittles, folks! One hour only!"

"One hour, eh?" A bulky man in a

worn sheepskin coat and heavy trousers stood in the yard. He had taken the muddy spray from the wheels across his legs. He shook his fist at the driver, saying, "If you're thinkin' of usin' my ferry, you rangtailed baboon, you'll wait more like a month than an hour! Less'n you want to swim, a'course—in which case they ain't no toll and welcome to it!"

Will was the second to light. As the half-angry, half-friendly harangue went on between the man in the yard and Luke Gredna upon the high driver's seat Will turned to give Miss Laura Carroll a hand. Though she gave him her smile, she paused with one foot on the step, staring in consternation at the deep puddles that lay between the coach and the threshold of the snug, two-storied log house beyond.

"Carry her in, young gentleman!" a heavy-hipped and elderly woman called from the open door. "Ye be strong enough, from the look of ye!"

He held out his arms, taking her slight weight and crossing the yard with ease. At the door he let her down. "Thank you, Mr. Duncan." It was the first time she had used his name. Their eyes met and held a moment before she turned inside.

There was the soft, inner laughter of Sam Boone at his back. He turned, seeing that the argument between Purdy and Gredna was still in course. The driver had climbed down and moved to the front of the team where both men stood, gesticulating toward the moored bulk of the ferry.

"Like I reckoned," Sam Boone said, "it'll be a while a'fore we can cross. Ain't no use tryin' to talk to them two whilst they got their necks bowed agin each other. Be a good idee to wash up and eat. I'm hungry's a grizzly pup."

During the easier stages of the morning's travel Sam Boone had spoken freely about the Jordan Creek country to the south, and of his own eminent position as one of the original locators upon the newly discovered lode.

"Just been up to Boise to see about organizin' the district accordin' to Hoyle," he'd said, expanding under the obvious respect to be seen in the other men's eyes. With the single exceptions of Will himself and Miss Laura Carroll, the remainder of the passengers inside and on top of the stage were prospective miners; anxious men, impatient and eager to strike Jordan and establish their claims upon this latest and most fabulous of lodes. Will Duncan's purpose had led him into this company of prospectors through accident alone.

They had all partaken fully of the ample meal Mrs. Purdy had served, and most of the men had returned to the bank above the ferry for a further consideration into the causes of their delay, when Will Duncan had his first suspicion that his own purpose might be known to others than himself.

The ferry was moored inside a cradle of log pilings that had been driven vertically into the bottom of the riverbed. The current sucked audibly past the outer end of the scow, holding the flat-bottomed boat in straining pressure against the lower line of piles. The river itself, deceitfully smooth, showed only an occasional surface boil. It was a good two hundred yards to the further bank.

Standing upon the rise of bank where the road dropped down to the ferry slip, Will saw the triangular rise of a cabletree several yards upshore. From the gear aboard the ferry he realized that the scow was normally held in place against the current by the lines and pulleys which ran along a lead cable stretching across the stream. In this fashion the ferrying could be made with a minimum danger of drifting downstream.

Now, however, as Jere Purdy himself was pointing out with much deliberation to the other passengers, the cable had parted, evidently at a point near its furthest end. The cable itself, rising from its sock-

et up over the near cabletree, lay in a coil upon the bank.

"Ain't enough men in Idaho to pole this ferry across without that cable!" Purdy's square-cut beard jabbed the air before Luke Gredna's nose. "And if'n they was, they'd have to take care of me 'afore I'd let 'em! I got time and money tied up in that there ferry! And I ain't lettin' no-big-mouthed muleskinners talk me out of my bread and board 'cause he's got a schedule to meet!"

Will had crossed the road to examine the coiled cable when the first dawning suspicion crossed his mind. The cable itself was heavy two-inch Manila hemp, of the sort used as a hawser or mooring line on sailing ships. The free end was divided into three single strands, carefully spliced at the joint and identical to the three strands running down from the cabletree and securing this end to the bank. He was holding the frayed end of one of the strands when he heard Sam Boone's voice at his shoulder.

"Some talk about you losing your mount back in Boise, Duncan?" He glanced at the man, seeing that Boone's eyes were upon the frayed end of the line he held. He noticed that Purdy and Gredna and the others had moved down toward the ferry. He looked more carefully at Boone, wondering what the miner had in mind.

He said, "Yes," and waited for the other to speak.

"Lost her right off the street, eh? Bedroll, saddle and the whole kiboodle?"

Will nodded.

"Report it to the marshal?"

"What's on your mind, Boone?"

THE man shrugged, still not meeting Will's eyes. "Horses pretty hard to come by in this country. Worth their weight in gold." He glanced up fleetingly, nodding finally at the line in Will's hand.

"Purdy says the line broke loose last night durin' the blow. 'Pears to me it'd take a sight more'n any blow to fray them ends that way." He paused. But when Will remained silent he said, "'Pears to me somebody might be downright anxious to keep a certain party from gettin' to the Creek. You lost your pony in Boise. Try to buy another?"

There was a growing impatience in Will at the man's obvious prying. He said again, "What's on your mind, Boone?"

The older man rubbed his jaw. He glanced back up the road. A single rider was coming down the slope. He made the final turn into the yard as both men watched. The horse was a huge, deep-chested dun. The man's slicker gleamed wetly as he stepped to earth. Two or three of the men moved up from the ferry, studying the new arrival.

"This's a new country, Duncan," Sam Boone said. "There was twenty-nine of us in the bunch that opened Jordan. Two or three hundred on the Creek now. New man comes in, nobody asks much where he came from, what he's doin' here. But we stick together on the Creek, Duncan." The man's glance came back and Will saw that his pale blue eyes were suddenly hard and without friendliness or warmth.

"You, now. You don't look like no mining man. Ain't got the cut for it, some way. And losin' your pony's another thing. You tried to buy another and couldn't, or you wouldn't be on this stage. Horses is hard to get, but not that hard—and you don't look broke." The man had turned to face him now and his voice came more deliberately as he continued.

"I'll put it flat, Duncan. It's my idee that one of the boys passed the word. I don't know which one and I don't care. But like I say, we stick together down on the Creek. We're friendly like and we don't care much about what the next gent did maybe five years back. But let some ranny come lookin' for one of us—" Sam

Boone shook his head and walked away.

Will Duncan watched the man go, skirting a wide puddle in the road as he dropped toward the ferry. There had been none of the laughter in Sam Boone's voice that had been so prominent during the trip down from Boise. As Will crossed the yard and went around toward the stables he felt a certain chagrin that his own purpose had been so apparent to the square-bodied mining man.

Was there any chance that Sam Boone, or any others in this country, had discovered Will's official status? Did they already know the identity of the man he was after?

But there could be no altering of Will Duncan's course. His orders were to bring in Peter McQueen. The fact that McQueen had struck it rich as one of the original locators upon the Jordan Creek lode was of no consequence at all to Will.

There was a new uneasiness as well as an added urgency in him now. It came to him that it would not be beyond Sam Boone to throw any added obstacle across his course that might come to hand. Will had suspected the theft of his mount to be more deliberate than it had appeared at the time. Now he was certain.

But this was useless contemplation. Will Duncan put these thoughts aside as he came into the stables, seeing the slicker-rider step out of one of the stalls. The man had a narrow face and quick, shifty eyes. He moved hurriedly and would have passed by Will had Will not spoken.

"Noticing your horse," he said. "Good looking mount. Wouldn't like to sell?"

The man grunted, turning on toward the house.

"Take three hundred gold?"

He went on.

"Five hundred," Will said.

The man stopped, halfway to the back door. He looked at Will.

"Mister, you want a horse," he said.

"You got one." He retraced a step, stopping abruptly. His gaze narrowed suspiciously. "You got that much—in gold?"

Will became conscious of the heavy moneybelt about his waist. He felt a sudden caution. "I'll have it for you before you're through eating," he said.

"Please—Mr. Duncan!"

Will had turned back to the barn, not noticing the girl upon the back step of the house until she spoke. Crossing the yard he noticed the quick, frightened glance she gave the slickered man as he pushed past her through the door. Will gave her his smile from the step, waiting.

"I heard you offer to buy that man's horse. You're going on, aren't you? Going on to Jordan Creek tonight?"

Will nodded. Her words came in a rush then, propelled by the urgency and underlying fear Will had noticed before.

"You've got to take me with you! Or let me have your horse! I'll pay you twice what you offered that man! I've got to be in Jordan Creek tonight! Mr. Duncan—Will—you don't know how terribly important it is! If I don't get there in time—"

Will shook his head. "I'm afraid you couldn't handle that dun, ma'am. And it would be plain damn foolishness for the two of us to try to swim her across."

"But you don't understand! Please, Will! I've got to get there tonight!" She stepped forward suddenly, putting her hand on his shoulder. She tried to smile. She said, "We'll see each other later, at Jordan Creek, or maybe at Boise. I can promise you that you will be well paid."

Will turned away. He said, "Sorry, ma'am," and shook his head and sloshed through the yard to the barn without looking back.

In the stall Will examined the dun. It was a magnificent animal, though its flanks were streaked with sweat. He reached beneath his shirt, unbuttoning the flaps of the moneybelt and counting out the twenty

double eagles, which he dropped loosely into a pocket of his coat. The horse was still saddled, cinch-loose. Though a carbine was snugged in its boot, there was no sign of a roll or pack. He turned at the sound of a step.

"Good lookin' horse." Purdy was a sharp eyed man. There was suspicion in the lines of his face above his square-cut beard. He teetered on the balls of his feet as Luke Gredna and one of the passengers moved idly into the barn. Jere Purdy said, "Figurin' on takin' a little ride, mister?"

The suggestion was plain to Will. He said, "Yes. Thought I would." There was something about the man's sly look that went against his grain.

"Well, now." Purdy's glance touched Gredna, as though for support. "Heard there was some talk about you losin' your mount up Boise way. You fixin' to claim this'n's yourn?"

Will saw the obvious relish with which the man awaited an answer. It was plain that Purdy was prepared for trouble, hoped for it in fact. And it came to him again that perhaps Purdy, too, knew who he was and why he was here. Sam Boone had joined the group at the ferry, had spoken to Purdy. They were both men of the country and would have the same loyalties, he knew. Will glanced at Gredna, but saw no sign of participation in the driver's horselike face.

He said, "I'm buying this horse and riding on to Jordan. Any objections?" There was a certain testiness in him now that would have welcomed opposition.

But the ferryman seemed to sense this, a faint tone of apology touching his voice. "Buying, eh?" He shook his head wonderingly. "First time I hear tell of a ranny sellin' his saddle this far down the line. Gold's cheap down this way, mister. Horseflesh is pretty scarce. Mind if I check your story?" At the look of Will's face he added quickly, "This's my place. I'm responsible here. Wouldn't want the

word to get around that Purdy's was a place to watch."

Will shrugged, letting it drop. He followed Purdy to the house. Gredna and the other man came on behind.

"Brett, this gent says he's buyin' your dun." They had crossed through the kitchen to the living room beyond. With a frown Will noticed that Sam Boone was in the room. The girl was seated at the opposite end of the table from which the slickered rider was taking his meal. Nor did the fact escape Will that Purdy had called the man by name. The ferryman insisted, "That right, Brett? You sellin' him your saddle?"

WILL stepped to the table. His hand raised from his pocket and he let the heavy coins clink softly into a pile. The man called Brett looked up. For a single instant there was greed in his eyes as he glanced at the gold. He looked at Purdy.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about!" he said. He came to his feet. "I'm ridin' south. You takin' me across?"

Will heard the soft, bubbling mirth of Sam Boone's laugh. He felt the blood drain from his face. He said, "Mister, you made a deal."

Brett's eyes came around. He poked his face at Will. He said distinctly, "Mister, that's a damned lie!"

Will Duncan froze. This thing was deliberate. There was no question about that. And yet the man still wore his slicker, his gun bulking but unavailable against his thigh. Dimly Will heard Purdy's words, realized that the ferryman had drawn a weapon and was covering them both.

"There'll be no gunplay, gents!" His voice was firm. "Brett, you'd better ride out, if you think you can swim the stream. And you, mister—you got some talkin' to do."

When the whole thing was over, Will

saw how simple it had been. It was Boone, of course. Sam Boone would have known the slickered man. And Will had had to reveal his identity, show his authority and the badge he wore. Deputy United States Marshal. Even Purdy had had to accept that.

But the chance of surprise was gone. Gone now for sure, with the narrow-faced man named Brett already across the river and riding south. There had been no chance to hold the man. Purdy had held his gun on Will, refusing to accept his credentials until the rider was gone.

It was within his power to arrest Sam Boone. Obstructing justice. And yet there was no proof. No proof that Boone had even spoken to the man.

It was not until one of the passengers, a man named Evans, had crossed the river and secured the cable that Will remembered that Miss Laura Carroll had been in the room. It was not until he'd noticed the new look of triumph within her eyes that he realized it might have been the girl herself who had spoken to Brett, and not Sam Boone at all.

There had been some argument about the cable. There was but the single team, with no relief at Purdy's. Horses were too scarce. Will had suggested the idea of riding a coach horse across, carrying a lead of smaller line attached to the cable's end. For the first time Luke Gredna had stood up to Will.

"One of the others, all right," he'd said. "But not you, Marshal. I ain't breakin' no law in protectin' my own! I reckon you want to git to Jordan pretty bad. And I reckon it's your duty. But I need them nags, Marshal, and I ain't takin' no chances."

Will had not argued. Evans had ridden across. The stage had been driven onto the ferry with the uneven team.

Will's thoughts had been running ahead to his quarry when Laura stepped down from the coach to the ferry's rough deck.

The horses were nervous, with a man at the head of each. Will leaned on the rail, staring downstream. The rain had stopped for a time, though the sky was dismal and dark.

"Well, Marshal Duncan, it seems we'll get there on time after all."

It was in this moment, as he turned to face the girl, that Will saw the change in Miss Laura Carroll. Though her face was yet pale, the suggestions of fear and anxiety that had lurked constantly in her glance were gone. There was a new sureness about her now; a look almost of triumph as he gazed at Will. Though he realized now that Laura herself might have been the one to compromise him by speaking to the man called Brett, there was a sudden deepening of his own curiosity about the girl. What was her part in this?

He looked at the girl and said, "Would you care if we were late, Laura?"

Color rose abruptly to her face. "Why—I don't know what you mean!"

"You knew who I was all along."

"That's not true!" Her glance faltered. She turned away, looking off across the river. The ferry had started to move. She started to speak again, but cut off with a gasp as the ferry cleared its slip and veered abruptly downstream. There was a doubtful moment as the weight of the loaded scow came full against the newly strung cable. The current sucked audibly at the planks. The cable sagged. A horse whinnied its fright and tried to rear. The cable held. The slow poling process began.

When the girl had regained her calm she flashed a glance at Will. Her attractiveness had deepened with the rise of color to her cheeks.

"Yes, I knew who you were," she said. "But not until I heard Mr. Boone speak to that man at the table. I offered him a thousand dollars for his horse! He was going to take it, too. Until Mr. Boone stepped in!"

"Sam Boone must carry plenty of weight down here."

"Enough." She was actually enjoying herself now, Will saw.

"How did Boone know who I was?"

"He suspected. That was enough. He found out, didn't he?"

"I could arrest the lot of you, you know. Obstructing justice. Accessories after the fact. You know why I'm here, don't you?"

"Yes! I know!" Anger flamed in her face. "Go ahead and arrest me, for all the good that will do! You'll never catch him now! Never! Peter McQueen will be on his way south, out of the territory, before you set foot on the Creek!"

Will shook his head. "Don't be too sure. He's struck it rich on Jordan, hasn't he? Do you think he will give that up to run again? And run where? I can go any place he goes. It's only a matter of time. Don't you think he knows that? He's got to stop sometime. No, Miss McQueen. Don't be too sure that your brother will run."

The girl's breath drew in. "You know!" She stared. "You knew all along?"

"No." Will looked down at the river's muddy flow. "I might have suspected. But it didn't come to me till now. The day I stopped at your folks' place in Oregon City. Parents and sister, the record said. When I was talking to your father I heard you and your mother whispering in the other room. Your folks knew I was after their son. Everyone knew about the first job he pulled; that there was United States mail on the stage he robbed."

"First job?" There was fear in these words; fear and disbelief.

Will looked at the girl. His voice was gentle. "Peter McQueen pulled four more robberies since that first one below Oregon City. He's killed three men, Laura. Two stage drivers and a government guard."

She stood white and defenseless before

him, horror in her eyes. He quickly continued to speak.

"I saw you at Umatilla ten days ago. And then in Boise last night, and again this morning. I should have known, I guess, seeing how anxious you were. A lone girl in this country is no usual thing." He paused, his glance gentle upon her face. "You shouldn't have come, Laura McQueen. It won't do him any good."

There was a deep compassion in Will Duncan then for this wisp of a girl who had tried to save her brother. She had known nothing of any crime beyond the first. She stood waxen before him, hand upon the ferry rail. He had stepped toward her quickly, suddenly afraid she was going to faint, when the sound of a shot slapped out across the river from the further bank.

Will swung, feeling the sudden tightness of his muscles as he stared toward shore. The ferry was in midstream, the long cable that Evans had secured sagging dangerously with the pull of the heavily loaded flatboat. Jere Purdy had stopped his poling to stare at the bank ahead.

Evans, who had been standing in the road beside the horse he had ridden across, had fallen to one knee and was struggling to rise. As those on the ferry watched another shot flamed out. Evans slumped into the mud.

There was movement beyond the line of trees that screened a bend in the road above. Two horsemen suddenly broke into the clear, reining up a few feet short of the bank. Will immediately recognized the slickered man called Brett, seeing him slip his carbine back into its boot as he stepped down beside the fallen man.

Although Will Duncan had never seen Peter McQueen, he had no doubts as to the identity of the second man. The ferry hung suspended, veering dangerously against the current, as this second man stepped down beside the cable's anchored strands. There was the gleam of a knife

in his hand as he bent toward the first hempen line.

In this final moment there was no doubt in anyone's mind about the man's intent. Voices broke up in sudden protest from the ferry. The man called Brett reached his carbine once more, standing above the man he had killed and sighting the weapon calmly at the scow. The heavy bullet tore splinters from the high seat of the stage. One of the horses whinnied, struggling against the man at its head.

"McQueen! Hey, McQueen! It's me—Sam Boone! Lay off that cable, you damned fool!"

Will heard the undertone of fear in Sam Boone's voice as he moved up beside the man at the front of the ferry. One of the miners beside Boone raised his gun. The older man struck it down, viciously. He glanced angrily about.

"Don't shoot, men! They're too far away for a six-gun, and that ranny with the rifle ain't kiddin'!" He cupped his hands about his mouth. "It's me—Sam Boone, McQueen! You hear?"

A SUDDEN silence grew as the strand parted beneath the knife in Peter McQueen's hand. Will saw the man straighten, saw him smile as he looked out at the ferry and at the bellying cable above. He was a big man, McQueen, wearing a plaid coat and corded trousers tucked into his boots. He stood spraddle-legged and seemed to be enjoying the scene. But the cable still held.

As McQueen stepped deliberately toward the second anchoring strand the girl's voice broke clear and loud.

"Peter! Peter, do you hear me? It's Laura! Your sister! Do you understand?"

There were exclamations of surprise from the crowded group of men. Will heard Sam Boone mutter, "Well, I'll be damned!" noticing the tone of relief that was in his voice.

Each eye was upon the man ashore as Peter McQueen stopped in midstride. He stared unbelievably at the scow. Laura McQueen called, "Run, Peter! Leave the country! You can still make it!"

For a long moment McQueen stared at the ferry, while those aboard stared back. Brett moved across suddenly from the road. The two men conferred. McQueen looked back, his voice raising in flat, commanding tones that carried easily across the water.

"You've got a lawman aboard! The rest of you stand clear!"

Will knew a sudden tenseness as he felt the glances of those about him. Slowly, one by one, the men moved back, taking shelter behind the body of the coach. Sam Boone muttered, "I tried to warn ye, boy!" but moved back with the rest.

Will saw the man beside McQueen slowly lift his rifle. There was a sharp hissing sound beside his ear and then the rifle's report as the smoke drifted away from the muzzle of the gun in Brett's hands.

"It won't do you any good, McQueen!" Will's voice was firm, though he stood unmoving against the rail. "There'll be another man along! And another!"

Brett leveled the carbine again. "So long, lawyer!" McQueen's voice called. "This's the end of the line!"

"No, Peter! No!" Laura McQueen ran across the ferry. Before Will could object she had thrown herself against him, twining her arms about his neck and pressing her body against his own. She did not try to call out again, but stood sobbing against Will's chest, a living shield against the threat of the gun upon the bank.

McQueen's curse carried across the water. Without hesitation he bent, the knife slicing down against the line. The strand and the cable gave with a snap. The ferry lurched, dipping down and back, swinging suddenly free upon the swift current. A man yelled, and another. Gun-

fire burst from the crowd and a horse broke free, rearing in its traces. Still holding the girl in his arms, Will saw the two men on the bank return to their mounts.

In spite of Jere Purdy's attempts with the pole, the ferry went over. Will had helped Luke Gredna cut the terrorized animals loose, lashing their rumps and sending them into the stream. Those who could swim had jumped. The scow caught on some submerged obstruction, the swift, ruthless current dragging it down. A huge floating log slammed into its bulk. The coach broke free, going into the stream as the ferry turned up and over.

Will Duncan fought for footing as he neared the bank. The girl's body had gone limp in his grasp. He found bottom, lost it, and found it again. He caught an overhanging branch and strained for shore. He pulled her up, kneeling upon the grassy bank beneath the trees.

"Laura! Laura, honey!" The words were but a whisper as he fought to clear his head. He was upon hands and knees beside her when he heard the crunching step along the bank.

"If at first you don't succeed, you can always try again, eh, lawman?"

Will knew the voice of Pete McQueen, remembering its harsh tone as the man had called out above the river. But somehow intensity did not come. Will Duncan had swallowed water by the quart, had given the river everything he'd had. He turned half about without rising, seeing McQueen in the glade beyond. Brett was just stepping down from his mount.

"Will! Oh, Will!" The girl stirred at his side. Her eyes opened. She sat up.

"Will, is it?" Pete McQueen laughed. He was a dark-eyed, swarthy faced man who bore little resemblance to his sister. He said, "All right, Will, on your feet! I don't want to shoot a man when he's down!"

Will started to rise. He got to one knee, feeling suddenly dizzy and reaching for the

ground. Brett laughed. Will focused his sight on the men.

He saw surprise and sudden anger blossom upon the narrow man's face at the same instant he felt the tug at his thigh. It was not until Brett yelled, "Look out, Pete!" and went for his gun that Will realized Laura had jerked his own gun from its holster.

Brett's gun was coming up as Will saw McQueen turn. Pete McQueen barked, "Hold it, Brett!" but the man was past stopping. There was disbelief in Will as he heard McQueen's gun go off. The narrow man staggered back, shock widening his eyes.

"She'd have killed me, damn you!" he said. But McQueen's gun exploded again and Brett jerked back with the impact, stumbling and going down.

"But you'd have killed her, Brett!" Pete McQueen spoke to the dead man as though he was still alive.

The whole thing had happened so quickly that there was still a look of bewilderment upon Pete McQueen's face when Will Duncan spoke. Will knew that the man had acted through sheer reflex alone. He took advantage of McQueen's reaction deliberately now.

He said, "Peter McQueen, I'm arresting you for the murders of two drivers and a government guard and for interference with the United States mails!" He came to his feet and was walking toward the man when McQueen slowly turned.

McQueen's eyes suddenly gleamed. He laughed abruptly. "It's your turn, lawman!" he said. His gun came up.

"No, Peter!" Laura's voice was flat. Will stopped, hand still outstretched. "I didn't know what you'd become until today! I didn't know about those men you killed! I was coming to warn you! And you've still got a chance! Go now and you can still get away! But if you raise that hammer, Peter—so help me—I'll kill you!"

In this instant Will Duncan saw Peter McQueen's life mirrored in his eyes. He knew there was consideration in the man for his sister. He had killed his friend for her but a moment before. But there was consideration too of the vast, legal wealth he had so recently uncovered in the discovery of the Jordan lode.

Will read his own death sentence within those eyes; read it, recognized it as such—and moved.

Laura screamed. The gun in her hand went off. It was this he had counted on, this one chance. McQueen had stepped back, his gun veering toward Laura. Will crashed into the man in the same instant he pulled off the shot. Will had the barrel of the gun in his hand, twisting it up as it exploded again. They went down together, the weapon between them. McQueen's free hand sought his throat, his fingers gouging Will's neck. The gun fired once more, muffled and flaming between their bodies. The hand at Will's throat went limp.

Sam Boone found them there on the bank, Laura crying softly in Will Duncan's arms. Soaked and bedraggled, the man was astride a coach horse and leading another. He looked at the bodies and then at Will.

"You're a brash, lucky man, marshal," he said. "I reckon you won't be goin' on into Jordan after all, eh?"

"I don't know, Boone. I don't think we're up to swimming that river again. And Miss McQueen will have some holdings on the Creek to look after now."

But the girl shook her head against Will's chest. "No, Will, no!" she said. "Let's get out of this country! Let's go home!"

Boone's eyes widened. The sound of his laughter came. "Home, eh? You reckon you can take care of that too, marshal?"

Will Duncan raised Laura's face from his chest. He tilted her chin with a finger.

"I reckon," he said. "I reckon I can."

NO MAN'S RANGE

(First of Two Parts)

By L. P. HOLMES

CHAPTER ONE

Treachery Rides

IT WAS in the middle of the steepest down pitch of the treacherous Calamity Grade that the brakes went bad.

Leaning the full weight of a big shoulder against the brake strap, Bill Thurston felt the rigging sag and go loose with an abruptness which came close to sending him plunging headlong off his none too secure perch atop this wagon load of timber poles.

By the time Bill had regained his balance the wagon, groaning and creaking under its ponderous load, was picking up speed and beginning to jam in on the heels of the startled wheelers of the eight-horse team hitch. The wheelers instinctively set back against the drive of the wagon, haunches bunched, hoofs skidding, but their efforts were puny and useless against the down-driving lunge of tons of raw timber. They were fairly lifted off their feet and sent floundering ahead.

Bill Thurston knew instantly that he had to make up his mind. He could jump right now, before the wagon picked up any more speed and so save his own neck, though such a move would definitely doom the horses and wagon to savage, crashing destruction at the bottom of the rock-ribbed gulch below the next turn, or he could ride it out and gamble on the long chance of bringing everything through safely to the wide flat below the grade, where the Carson road cut through. Bill made his choice—he stayed with the load.

Already the wheelers, helpless against

the gathering surge of the wagon, were breaking into a heavy gallop, crowding the heels of the pointers, which in turn began storming up on the swing so that the swing crowded the leaders.

The first thing to do was get the horses strung out and running before one of them got tangled and went down. Bill Thurston did that by dint of shrill yells



"I'll match you blood for blood, bullet for bullet and grave for grave," Bill Thurston swore—"an' when I'm dead, gents—you'll just have started to fight!"

and the coiling, popping lash of his long whip. Traces snapped taut, the chain tightened.

Everything depended on what happened at the turn, which was now rushing up to meet driver, horses and wagon. At the turn everything depended upon the pointers of the team. They had to get over the chain and throw their best weight against the drive of the wagon tongue, pulling it around to steer the wagon through the curve. Ordinarily, because of

thorough training and long practice, the pointers would have accomplished this maneuver smoothly, almost automatically. But now—

Panic was surging in the animals at this moment. Everything depended on whether Bill Thurston's voice and whip could break through that panic and wring obedience into being.

A big, rangy, evenly matched pair of bays the pointers were, and now Bill Thurston sent his pleading yell right at

Bill came up hard and forced Morlan back. . . .



them. It was the near one that had to get across the chain, for the turn below was to the right.

"Over, Cob!" yelled Bill. "Over, boy! Gee! Over—!"

Bill's whip cracked its own message, and somehow, through the terror of the animals, the voice of authority and the habit of long training made its way. There was a running leap and a scramble and Cob was across the chain and with his mate, lunging hard in toward the high cutbank on the right.

The wagon began coming around. Bill held his breath, waiting—waiting for the first tipping sag that would signify that the worst had happened. If that sag came, well, he'd done his best and all that was left to him then was to jump and take his chances, meaning a broken arm or leg—maybe a broken neck.

There was no sag, no tip of the wagon. Bill felt the long timbers shift, heard them growl one against the other, then drop back into place. The rumbling, jouncing wagon was through the dangerous turn and racing down the last straight drop of the grade to the welcome flat below.

In sheer relief and exuberance over putting behind a staggering danger, he sent his long yell whooping ahead. The safety of the flat lifted swiftly to meet them and then, with a final lurch, the thundering wagon and the racing horses were safely on it while Bill, using jerk line alone now, set the leaders into a long curve, calculated to skid the wagon around just enough to bring it to a gradual and safe halt.

The skid and turn had already begun before Bill Thurston saw the old Conestoga wagon drifting slowly along the Carson City road. By then it was too late to stop or straighten out. Bill saw what was coming and realized he couldn't do a thing. He did yell, once more.

He saw a gaunt gray beard on the seat of the Conestoga lunge half upright, mouth

opening to shout a useless warning, saw him lash with a stubby whip at his jaded, bony team and start swinging them away.

The old man's effort almost did the trick, but not quite. The skid of Bill's wagon closed the gap and the long overhang of pole ends at the rear did the damage. They smashed into the near rear wheel of the Conestoga, chopping it and its off mate cleanly from under the old wagon, letting the box of that rickety vehicle down with a crash. Then for a long moment there was only dust and confusion.

A SLIGHT upgrade in the flat took all of the run out of Bill's wagon and his reassuring voice reaching out to the team did the rest. The wagon came to a halt and Bill jumped down and stood uncertainly for a moment on legs that were strangely weak and quivering. Stumbling a little, he ran back toward the wreck of the Conestoga wagon.

He almost stumbled over someone in the lifting dust, someone heading his way. She wasn't very big—the top of her curly auburn head was no higher than Bill Thurston's chin. A poke bonnet, held about her slender throat by the tie strings, hung over one shoulder. A wide tear flapped in her calico skirt. And she was mad, so mad that her eyes were fairly throwing sparks.

"You idiot!" she cried. "You crazy, reckless, drunken idiot! Haven't you any more sense than to come charging down a grade like that with a heavily loaded wagon? I could scratch your stupid eyes out! Drunk—that's what you are, and I'm all bumped and bruised and torn—"

It might have been a few tears of rage added to the sparks in her eyes that made them flash so brightly. She was very definitely a pretty girl, just about the prettiest Bill had ever bumped into, and to have her come suddenly out of the dust to storm and rage at him was enough to

set him back on his heels and hold him speechless for a moment.

Bill saw that she was gathering breath for another outburst so he jerked out of his amaze and beat her to it.

"Hold on a minute. I'm not drunk and I didn't make that wild ride on purpose. Something happened to my brakes. Don't think I enjoyed it—I'm still scared stiff. I'm sorry I wrecked the old Conestoga. And if anybody is hurt, I want to know about it. Let's get over there."

He caught her by the arm, whirled her around and hustled her along, figuring that was the best way to quiet her down. She tried to strike his hand aside, but it was a big hand, brawny and calloused and, though it was reasonably gentle it was also far too strong for her to do anything about.

There was no doubt of the old Conestoga being thoroughly and completely wrecked. The two rear wheels were nothing but splinters. The box of the wagon was knocked all out of line, the tailgate shattered. It was a forlorn and hopeless wreck.

Bill Thurston was immensely relieved to see the gaunt and bearded oldster who had been driving the rig standing now beside it, his arm about the thin shoulders of a white-haired, calico-clad woman, who was regarding the wreck tearfully.

"Just the three of you in that wagon?" Thurston demanded of the girl beside him.

"Just the three of us," snapped the girl. "But that doesn't excuse you. You might have killed all of us. And let go of my arm. I don't need such as you to lead me around. Will you let me go?"

Bill loosened his grip as she jerked to free herself and, pulling against this sudden lack of resistance, she nearly fell down. Bill grinned, mainly because of the relief flooding him now that he knew no one was hurt.

"There's nothing funny about this!"

flamed the girl. "That wagon is just about all those dear old people possessed in the world, and now you've wrecked it, you big, stupid oaf!"

Bill's grin faded and lines of sternness settled about the broad, hard angles of his jaw. "All right," he said curtly. "You've called me all the names you could think of. You've got the mad out of your system. We'll call it all my fault, though it really wasn't any true fault of mine. It was just one of those things. I'll see that the folks get another wagon, better than the one they had. The main thing is that nobody was really hurt."

He stepped away from the girl, took off his hat and faced the old couple.

"Folks, I'm mighty sorry this happened. Something went wrong with my brake coming down that gulch road, and all I could do was ride it out and hope for the best. I'm glad nobody was hurt and I'll see that you get another wagon. Where you heading for—Carson City?"

The man said, "That's right, but seems we're not going to get there for a while."

The older woman looked at Bill. She had very fine eyes in her worn face. She said, "We know you didn't do this on purpose. It is just another of the breaks of wrong kind of luck that has dogged us for so long. Don't feel bad, young man."

"Thanks, ma'am," said Bill. "I'm Bill Thurston. I'm taking that load of pole timber to Carson City. Here's what I suggest we do. I'll go get my rig and pull up along side of your wagon. We'll load all your stuff on my outfit and I'll take you to Carson. There I'll get you another wagon. That's the fairest thing I know to do."

"You're very kind. I'm Mrs. Starr. This is my husband, Abner. And this is Kip Sharpe, who has been traveling with us temporarily. Abner, you heard what Mr. Thurston said. We'll get to Carson City after all. Start getting our things out of the wagon."

Bill Thurston went back to his wagon. He went along the lathered, still nervous team first, petting and quieting them, looking them over to see if they were in any way injured. Happily, all were sound. Bill gave the pointers an extra pat. Then he went back and began checking up on the brake.

The brake blocks were hanging out of line. Bill got down and crawled under the wagon. The heavy beam of seasoned ash which reached across beneath the wagon frame was sagging in two pieces. And where the brake beam had broken, it had been sawed almost in half!

It had been cunningly done, that job. Enough wood had been left to hold up under ordinary braking strain, but not enough to stand the full, hard pull that was necessary to let a heavily loaded wagon down that steepest pitch on Calamity Grade.

When Bill Thurston crawled out from under his wagon, his jaw was grim and his gray eyes bleak.

Abner Starr asked, "Find out what happened to your brake?"

Bill nodded. "Yeah. Somebody sawed the beam nearly in half. When I put a real pull on the strap, the beam broke. Then it was a case of a free and wild ride down the mountain."

Abner Starr blinked his tired eyes. "Who'd be low enough to pull a trick like that on a man?"

Bill shrugged. "I got my enemies. Good thing it's level going from here into Carson. I can make it without worrying about a brake."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunflame Town

WITH the rolling, gray-brown reaches of the Nevada desert on one hand and the swiftly lifting flanks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains

on the other, Bill Thurston drove his wagon load of timber poles, heading for the teeming freight compounds at Carson City.

There was a clamoring market for these trim, straight poles of timber, for a new, daring project was about to begin. These poles, and thousands more just like them, were to be set up in the desert, twenty-five to the mile, and to them a thin line of wire was to be strung, so that in a matter of seconds this thing called a telegraph could handle and transmit messages which it now took even the valiant Pony Express days to carry. Here was another slim, strong strand, destined to do its share in tying together the frontiers of a far-flung empire.

As he drove, Bill Thurston's thoughts were divided. For a time they were all of that sawed brake beam and a dark contemplation of who had done it, and why. But he was also constantly conscious of the presence of this slim spitfire of a girl who was perched on the logs back there behind him, hugging a couple of bundles of personal effects.

Remembering how she had appeared suddenly before him in the shifting dust and the way she had lit into him, Bill had to grin. A fiery little scamp for fair, and all the prettier for it. Bill swung his head as though for a casual glance back along the road, but mainly for another look at this Kip Sharpe. He found her eyes fixed on him.

"Feeling better, now that you're over your mad?"

She had that little trick of tossing her head. "Maybe I'm not over my mad, as you so neatly put it. How far is it to Carson City?"

Bill glanced at the sun, now dipping fast toward the lofty crest of the mountains to the west. "It'll be dark when we get there," he said briefly.

It was, a thick, velvet dark, with the first stars already in the sky and the lights

of the lusty frontier settlement glowing redly. Bill Thurston swung his wagon around to the pole yards and let it settle to a creaking halt. A man with a dimly flickering lantern came hurrying up, sending a slightly anxious call ahead.

"Bill? Bill Thurston?"

"Yeah, Si—me in person."

"You're late. I was beginning to worry. Anything happen?"

"Had a few interesting minutes," Bill drawled. "How about the other boys—did they all get in with a load?"

"All here and unloaded. You're the last. Sa-ay, you got somebody riding with you."

"That's right." Bill was sliding down off the load as he spoke. Now he turned to help Mrs. Starr down. "Had a mite of a smashup on the flat below Calamity Grade. These folks lost a wagon. Call it my fault. I aim to let 'em have that Conestoga standing out back of our cabin. This is Mr. and Mrs. Abner Starr. Folks, meet my partner, Silas Chiles. Oh yeah, Si—the young lady still up there on the load is Miss Kip Sharpe. You can come down, Miss Sharpe. This is that Carson City you were askin' me about."

Her reply was muffled and indistinct, but she made no move to come down. Bill helped Abner Starr get the gear off the load, then said, "Those two horses of yours that we brought in at lead, you can put 'em in our feeding corral for the night. Si here will show you which corral that is. And Si, these folks have to have a place to spend the night. They can use our cabin and you and me'll bed down in the bunkhouse with the boys."

"Sure," answered Si heartily. "That'll be fine. Come along, Starr—I'll show you where to put your horses."

"You're very kind," said Mrs. Starr. "But we can't put you out of your cabin. We'll bed down somewhere here in the open. It won't be the first time."

"Not in this camp you won't," differed

Bill. "This camp is just beginning to show its teeth for the night. Come a couple of hours from now it'll be really growling. You womenfolks got to be safe inside. This way."

It wasn't too much of a cabin, but it was clean and tidy and provided four stout walls and a roof. Bill got a light going and said, "Make yourself to home, ma'am. I'll go bring in the rest of your beddin'. There's the stove and the woodbox is full and so is the grub shelf. Use whatever you want, and welcome."

There was the glint of tears in Sarah Starr's fine eyes as she murmured again, "You're very kind."

Back at the wagon Bill saw a small figure still humped up there, dark against the stars. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You still up there? Now listen, miss. Gettin' mad is one thing, but gettin' so mad you aim to be stubborn is something else again. You skitter on down here."

Her voice reached him, strangely meek. "I'm sorry, but I can't help myself. On the ride in, the logs must have shifted, or something. Anyway, my skirt's caught and I can't get it free."

Bill climbed up beside her, chuckling. "This is what you get for being so sassy, for callin' me a drunken idiot and all that sort of thing. Serve you right if I let you up here all night like a stranded hooty owl."

"I could tear it loose," admitted the girl. "But it is the only skirt I own and it's already the worse for wear."

"Have you free in a jiffy," Bill assured her. "I got a pry bar up front."

He got the steel bar, jammed the point of it between the two poles which had caught the skirt and threw his full weight into the effort. "Now try it."

The girl stood up. "I'm free. Thank you."

Bill dropped down off the load and offered his hand. This time she accepted the help. Bill caught her by the elbows

and brought her lightly to the ground.

"Still mad?" he asked.

He couldn't see her face in the dark, but somehow he knew that a faint smile was quirking her lips. "Not quite as mad," she answered. "But you can't image what a terrible, helpless feeling it was to see that load of timbers roaring down at us. And then that awful crash and the next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back in that dusty road. And you were yelling like a wild man. But I take back that drunken idiot part. I realize now that you couldn't help yourself any more than I could. Now, if you'll show me where Mrs. Starr is—"

"Sure," said Bill. "Gimme your gear."

AT THE cabin, Mrs. Starr already had a fire going in the stove and was beginning to put a meal together. "You and your partner must certainly help us eat some of your food, Mr. Thurston."

Bill shook his head. "Don't wait for Si and me, ma'am. We got chores to do, my team to look after and things like that. Then there's a little matter of a sawed brake beam I want to look into. A last word to you folks. This is a wild, rough camp, with plenty of bad actors in it. Good women aren't seen on the street at night. You keep that door closed and the bar thrown."

As Bill and his partner headed back to take care of Bill's team, Si Chiles said, "All right, boy. Now give me the story."

Bill told it, tersely. A harsh anger whipped through Si's comment. "Only one person I know that'd be interested in seeing a Thurston and Chiles wagon go off the grade. Graf Broderick!"

Bill nodded. "I figure it that way, Si. Broderick's got a rich business going, hauling supplies for the Pony Express stations out to Fort Churchill and beyond. He knows same as everybody else that as soon as the telegraph goes in, the Pony

Express is through. When it is, so is his business of freighting supplies in for Russell, Majors and Waddell. This ain't the first time Broderick's tried to kick a spoke out of our wheel."

"No, it ain't," declared Si Chiles. "But it's the first time he's gone far enough to try and kill you! What do you figger to do, Bill?"

"Have a little talk with friend Broderick," said Bill grimly. "Tell him off, once and for all. If he's willing to try this sort of dirty business here at Carson, what will he try out in the desert? Now is the time to convince Graf Broderick that he'll be wise to leave Thurston and Chiles alone."

"We'll talk to him together," vowed Si. "I got a few things to tell him myself."

"No," differed Bill. "You'll leave that up to me, Si. You got plenty to do keeping your end of our deal moving. Leave the rough stuff up to me."

Silas Chiles was a dried up, leathery, waspy little man, old enough to be Bill Thurston's father. He was pugnacious and ready to fight at the drop of a hat, but age had slowed him up along with an old injury that made him limp slightly when he walked.

"Doggone it, boy!" snapped Si testily, "why do you allus treat me like I was so old and useless? I ain't afraid of Graf Broderick. I'll spit in his eye an' make him like it. If he talks back I'll shoot him loose from his belt buckle."

Bill dropped a big hand on the little man's shoulder. "I know—I know, Si. You ain't afraid of any man on earth. But that's just the trouble. If you were afraid, I wouldn't worry about you jumping into some trouble that'd be too much for you to handle. Now don't cuss and sizzle. This will be handled my way."

But Si did cuss and sizzle, all the time they were unhitching Bill's team and turning the animals into the feed corral. This chore done, they bought a rough

meal at a rougher eating house and then moved back out to the street.

It was as Bill Thurston had told the Starrs and Kip Sharpe. As the night wore on, Carson City began to show its teeth more and more, while its growl grew ever louder. There was no form and permanent substance to the town yet; it was too raw and young. But there were rough and ready buildings of a sort along the street and some structures, hastily and lately thrown up, were even more of canvas than they were of wood. Rough and ready bars were pouring out raw whiskey; the howl of a drunk echoed across the night.

"She's warmin' up," said Si Chiles of the town. Then, wheedling, "Better let me come along when you go see Broderick."

Bill Thurston chuckled. "You're a persistent old gadfly. We settled that a while back."

"All right, if you want to be so danged stubborn," growled the older man. "But in one thing I will have my way. It's high time you started packin' a gun, boy—and the time to start is now. Here, stick this down in your jeans."

From some hiding place in his coat, Si hauled out a long-barreled Dragoon Colt revolver and pushed it into his partner's hand.

"I don't need a gun," protested Bill. "Things between us and Broderick haven't reached a shooting stage."

Si Chiles grunted. "I don't know what you call the shootin' stage. But from what you tell me the only reason you didn't get your fool neck broke today was because you were shot with luck and because you had the smartest pair of pointers in Nevada runnin' in your team. Somebody was out to get your neck, boy—and if they were then they still are. You keep that gun—I got the mate to it for my comfort. Now I'm goin' to hunt up Ben Rabby an' see if he knows yet when them telegraph people want us to start layin'

poles across the desert. Watch that Graf Broderick—he's a smooth one."

Si headed away, definite and peppery, limping a little as he walked. Bill Thurston cut down the street in the opposite direction, the bulk of the gun tucked under his belt back on the left side where the flap of the worn old corduroy coat would hide it. He turned in at the door of the largest building on the street, which housed the office and warehouse of Graf Broderick's Desert Valley Freight & Supply Company.

CHAPTER THREE

Fighting Talk

THE office was small and crowded with three desks, some filing cases and other paraphernalia. A round-shouldered, foxy-faced man was at work at one of the desks. He looked up, started slightly, then spoke thinly.

"Broderick ain't here."

"I can see that, Loftus," said Bill. "Where is he?"

Loftus shrugged. "Out around town somewhere. Maybe over at the corrals. Got four double wagon outfits headin' for Fort Churchill in the mornin'. Don't know whether he'll be back tonight."

"I'll gamble," said Bill briefly.

He dropped into one of the desk chairs and got out his pipe. This was Graf Broderick's desk and chair and it depended, thought Bill, just which side of Graf Broderick you knew, as to how big a man you rated him. There were a lot of people who figured Broderick just about the biggest man this side of the Sierras. Certainly no one could deny that the man had drive and initiative and the ability to do things. But by the same token, those who had got in the way of Broderick's economic ambitions had found that he could be merciless and unscrupulous.

Outside the town rumbled and growled.

In here things were quiet except for the scratching of Loftus' pen and the rustle of a ledger page being turned. Bill's glance ran idly over the desk in front of him. It was stacked with way bills and invoices of one sort or another and an item on one of these caught Bill's eye.

He knew that Loftus was watching him guardedly, eyes alternately swinging from his work to where Bill sat, then back again. Bill registered the utmost unconcern, sliding deeper into the chair as though for more complete relaxation, blowing a cloud of smoke at the shadowy rafters. But this move brought him just a trifle closer to that invoice and now, as his eyes touched it swiftly, he was certain of that particular item.

Five cases of rifles.

The door opened abruptly and two men came in. One was Graf Broderick, raw-boned, bold-featured. With him was Morlan, his wagon boss, a thick-thewed fellow with a dented nose and beetling brows and a reputation for rough and tumble battling. Muleskinners and freighters along the frontier were a wild and unruly lot and Rube Morlan was noted for his ability to keep them in line.

"Hardly expecting to see you here, Thurston," rapped Broderick, roughly challenging.

Bill Thurston smiled thinly. "I figured you weren't. What you were expecting was word that I'd been found out in the gulch below Calamity Grade, pounded to a pulp under a load of telegraph poles. Sawing my brake beam was a smart trick, Broderick, but dirty. It didn't work because I had a smart pair of pointers in my team and they steered the wagon through that bad turn."

Broderick's eyes hardened. "I don't know what the devil you're driving at. Talk sense, can't you?"

"I'm talking sense." A flinty edge crept into Thurston's voice. "You probably didn't personally use a saw on the brake

beam of my wagon, but I'd wager my right leg that you ordered it done. You fancy yourself a smart man, Broderick. But don't make the mistake of figuring everybody else a complete fool."

Graf Broderick threw up an impatient hand. "I got no time to listen to a crazy man. If you can't talk sense, get out."

Bill Thurston got to his feet. "You'll listen and like it. There was Bob Sensenbaugh, running three pole wagons out of the hills. You tried to buy Bob out, at a price that was robbery. Bob told me about that. Bob turned you down. Less than a week later he was found out by the freight corrals with his skull clubbed in."

Bill knocked the dottle from his pipe, tapping it on the corner of the desk. "Then there was Alec Tye," he went on. "Alec lost sixteen head of horses, poisoned. Alec found traces of white powder in his oat box. Powdered arsenic. The loss broke Alec and he had to go out of business. You bullied Lett Stevens and Rowdy Collins into selling out to you, at your price. Probably they were remembering what happened to Bob Sensenbaugh. Finally, there was that mysterious fire that burned Mike Frazier's pole-cutting camp to the ground, up in Cedar Basin. It happened while Mike and his crew were out in the timber. Only the cook was in camp. Everything burned to the ground and the cook hasn't been seen since. But Mike told me they found some charred bones in the cooled embers."

Graf Broderick laughed harshly. "Now I know you're crazy. A muleskinner gets in a brawl and has his skull knocked in. A drunken cook burns up himself and a timber camp. And you got the supreme gall to come in here and tell me I'm responsible. Listen, Thurston. I'm a busy man. I got a big business to handle and run and no time to listen to such silly claptrap."

"Your big business," Bill Thurston said bluntly, "is furnishing and freighting

supplies to the Pony Express stations from here to Fort Churchill and beyond, as far as Egan Canyon way out where the Utah Territory begins. It's big business now, and it will stay big business as long as the Pony Express lives. But the very moment the first message clicks over a telegraph wire between Carson and Salt Lake, the Pony Express is dead. It's to your interest to delay the building of the telegraph line as long as possible. One way to delay it is to keep the necessary supply of telegraph poles from coming down out of the mountains. Still think I'm crazy, Broderick?"

Graf Broderick, an erect man, was even more rigidly so, now. His black eyes no longer flashed. They had turned dull and savage.

"You've talked a lot, Thurston. Where does it get you?"

"To the point," Bill Thurston retorted. "Me and Si Chiles got ten wagons hauling poles out of the hills. We're also going to freight poles out across the desert for the telegraph people. That's also big business, Broderick—which hurts you with every pole delivered. Leave us alone. You hear me? Leave us alone! If any more queer accidents, such as tampered brakes, happen to any Thurston & Chiles wagons, I'm coming after you! I won't bother with your hired hands who might have done the actual dirty work. I'll come after you! Do I make myself clear?"

Graf Broderick's face pulled into a hard mask. "I've only one answer to threats, Thurston," he bit out. "You should have left when I first told you to. All right, Rube—get him!"

Rube Morlan was fast, very fast for a man of his build. He came at Bill Thurston in a low, hard, lunging charge, hands spread and clawing. It was the way Rube Morlan liked to fight, to get hold of a man, wrestle him down and then work on him with every dirty trick in the book.

Bill Thurston stepped to meet him,

shooting a straight, driving right fist at Morlan's face.

HAD IT landed squarely it would have stopped Rube Morlan then and there. But Morlan dropped his bullet head ever so slightly and Bill's fist landed high, skidding over the top of Morlan's head. Even so, the punch made Morlan wobble, though it did not stop his charge. He crashed into Bill, locked a leg about him and tried to wrestle him down.

It was a case of fighting the devil with his own tools. Bill brought up a driving knee which caught Morlan low in the body, hurt him and made him give way a little. Morlan stabbed clawing fingers at Bill's face and eyes. Bill pulled his head back far enough to save his eyes, but he felt the hot burn of Morlan's clawing fingers gouging across his jaw.

He got his left arm up inside and drove his forearm against Morlan's throat, forcing him back, which gave him room enough to smash another right fist home. This one landed squarely on Morlan's mouth and made a mess of it. With a jerk and a lunge, Bill was clear.

He did not hesitate. He caught up the round-backed chair he'd been sitting in and brought it smashing down on Rube Morlan's head and shoulders. The heavy edge of the chair seat caught Morlan right across the bridge of his dented nose and the chair shattered. Morlan went down heavily and stayed there, his breathing a blubbery whistle through a smashed up nose and mouth.

Banked up anger was like a raging flood, once it broke confinement. Bill Thurston whirled to go after Graf Broderick and saw the gun that was now in Broderick's hand. Bill still held a remnant of the shattered chair, and he threw it at Broderick's face.

Graf Broderick had to duck, or take that hurtling piece of wood squarely

across the eyes. He ducked, and the flat thunder of his gun bludgeoned the room. Bill Thurston felt the burn of the slug across his ribs even as he took off in a headlong dive, clean across the desk. He felt his right shoulder smash solidly into Graf Broderick's midsection and the impact drove Broderick back and to the floor, Bill piling up on top of him.

For an instant Broderick was dazed and in that moment Bill wrenched the gun from his fingers and brought the heavy barrel of the weapon thudding down on Broderick's head. Broderick went completely limp and Bill staggered to his feet.

Loftus, the clerk, was out of his chair, a hand fumbling indecisively in a drawer of his desk, his sly, foxy face working and white. But there was little fighting metal in Loftus; he wasn't up to flashing the gun he was fumbling with.

"Drop it!" blurted Bill Thurston thickly. "Get over against that wall—quick!"

Loftus skipped like a frightened cricket, lifted his hands. Bill moved over to the desk, got Loftus' gun. Then he backed toward the door. "Stick a head out of the door and I'll blow it off!" was Bill's final cold threat to the frightened Loftus.

Bill fumbled the door open and backed out, bumping solidly into someone who had just mounted the low outside step. The impact did not bother Bill, but the other figure, small and slight, staggered and went down on one knee.

Bill whirled, alert and wary, then froze, wordless and staring. The light from inside, reaching through the open door, picked out the half frightened, half indignant face of Kip Sharpe.

For a moment Bill was without words, then, as the girl scrambled to her feet, he found his voice.

"You! What are you doing here? Thought I told you to stay safe in the cabin with the Starrs. Girl, you got no business wandering around this street in the dark."

She flared back at him. "There's nothing wrong with this street except big oafs like you blundering around, knocking people down!" She stared at the guns Bill held. "I heard a shot. You—you've killed somebody!"

"No!" growled Bill. "I should have, but I didn't. Where do you think you're going?"

"In here, to see Mr. Graf Broderick. Get out of my way."

"You don't want to see Broderick. He won't be nice to talk to just now. You come on back to the cabin with me." Bill pocketed the guns he had taken from Broderick and Loftus, reached for her arm.

She dodged past him, into Broderick's office. "You mind your business and I'll mind mine."

Bill took half a step after her, then stopped, shaking his head. After all, what was this girl, Kip Sharpe, to him? Suddenly Bill realized that the whole left side of his shirt was soggy with blood. He pressed a hand against the wound and went off up the street.

By lantern light, Si Chiles took one look at that bloody shirt then grabbed Bill Thurston's arm and headed him for the cabin.

"We'll need hot water and clean bandage for that," growled Si. "That means our cabin. Don't care if them wagon folks are there. This time you do as I say. Come on!"

Mrs. Starr answered Si's knock. "Bill here went and got himself shot," explained Si tersely. "If you'll sorta look after him for a minute, Ma'am, I'll go get a bottle of balsam oil I got cached out at the feeding corrals."

Bill saw it was no use arguing. Mrs. Starr helped him out of his coat, got a pair of scissors from somewhere and cut the soggy shirt completely off him. At sight of the wound she clucked her tongue softly.

A fire was going in the stove, for these desert nights were chill. The kettle was singing. While Abner Starr held the lamp for best light, Mrs. Starr went to work. Bill gritted his teeth.

"The bullet," said Mrs. Starr, "went in, skidded along a rib and then came out again. You were lucky, very lucky, young man."

Bill's back was to the door and he did not hear it softly open and shut. He just sat there, big shoulders slumped, while the wound was washed, daubed with the soothing, magically healing balsam oil, then firmly bandaged by the deft, gentle fingers of the white-haired emigrant woman.

Si Chiles got a clean shirt from Bill's warbag and helped him on with it. Mrs. Starr said, "You should spend the night in your own bunk. We'll find other quarters."

"Couldn't think of it, Ma'am," answered Bill, standing up. "Little scratch like this won't bother me. Thanks for the doctorin' job. All right, Si."

Bill turned to the door, stopped short, staring. There, slim shoulders flattened against the far wall, stood Kip Sharpe.

Her eyes were very big and sober. Bill grinned a trifle crookedly.

"Reckon you didn't find Graf Broderick in any fit shape of mind to talk business, did you? I warned you, remember?"

The girl flushed slightly but did not answer. Bill and Si Chiles went out.

Si Chiles said, "Saw Ben Rabby. He said we could start haulin' poles out into the desert any time now. Fact is, Ben wants us to put all our wagons on that part of the job. He says that with the poles stacked here at Carson and what have already been brought into Fort Churchill, there's enough to carry through to the Silver Mountains. Ben's sending Mike Frazier out to set up a pole cutting camp in the Silvers. When we get that far, we'll work on what Mike'll have ready for us."

"Something I saw in Graf Broderick's office, Si," said Bill. "I been wondering about it. An item of an invoice on his desk. The item read 'five cases of rifles'. Now just what would Broderick be wanting with five cases of rifles? And what business would that Kip Sharpe have with Broderick?"

(To be concluded)



It was man against time, battling against all odds when young Tod Lee determined to drive the . . .

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COWPOKES ON THE STRAY

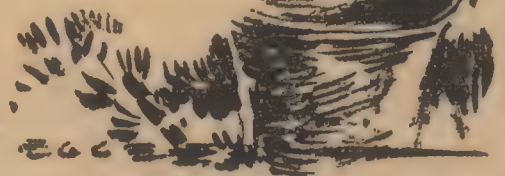
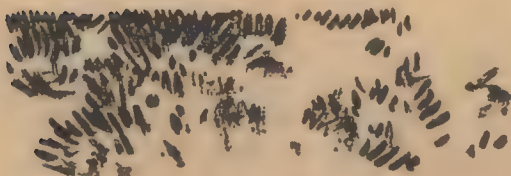
By S. OMAR BARKER

*T*HERE never was a buckaroo this side of kingdom come,
Who didn't sometime hanker for a spell out on the bum,
To ride just where he wanted to and take a little view
Of other cattle ranges off beyond them hills so blue.
He might work awful steady for a year or two or three,
Then suddenly decide that it was time for him to see
The hoot owl and the elephant, and note the ways of men
On strange and distant ranges where he hadn't never been.
He sometimes had a pardner and he sometimes rode alone,
And when he hit a country where his earmarks wasn't known,
The sheriffs kinder watched him, but at cow camps that he hit,
It sure was plumb hos-pittable, the welcome he would git.





*They might think he was honest or consider him a scamp,
But purt near never asked him what had brought him to their camp.
They knowed he was a cowpoke by his manners and his gear—
And that was his credentials on the ol' rangeland frontier.
Not even cooks objected to a cowboy on the stray
As long as he behaved hisself and didn't try to pay
For what he got, except by maybe snakin' in some wood,
Or helpin', unrequested, in whatever ways he could.
That's maybe why them cowpokes on the oldtime Western range
Enjoyed goin' on the bum, sometimes, just for a change.
They liked to see new country on the far hills' other side,
But they also sure enjoyed all them visits on their ride,
Where they could play the coffeepot and swap a yarn or two
Around a cowcamp fire at night, the way all cowboys do.
And them that made them welcome, being of the selfsame breed,
Would always give the cowboy stray his welcome and a feed,
Because they knowed that they themselves sometime might take a ride
To set around strange campfires on the blue hills' other side!*



THE KID DIES HARD

There ain't nothing'll make a man of you faster than a smoking six, the kid knew as he set out to grow up in the space of one hell-born instant . . . dead or alive!

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

RING CALLAHAN must have heard their boots on the shaky balcony floor. He pulled the door open before Dave Ramsey reached it. Dave walked by him into the office. Smiley Shavalda followed Dave in, clapping him heavily on the back.

"Here's your new brand inspector, Callahan," Smiley said. "Loaded three hundred steers this morning and never missed an earmark."

Callahan walked behind the spur-scarred desk in the center of the meagerly furnished office. He was in his middle thirties, a keg-chested man with a shock of bright red hair above a florid face.

"Three hundred," he grinned. "And not one mistake."

"Not one," echoed Smiley Shavalda.

Callahan's swivel chair squawked as he sat down. "A lot of people thought Grant Neves made a mistake, Dave, when he appointed such a kid brand inspector."

"Yeah," grinned Shavalda. "A mistake."

Dave glanced sharply at the Circle X foreman. Shavalda was heavy-framed, black-haired, his swarthy face brutally sculptured.

"Why do you keep harping on mistakes?" Dave asked.

Callahan carefully chose a cigar from a box on the desk. "Now, Dave, we've known you since you was a button, run-

ning the streets after your dad got killed under that train. I guess we all had a hand in your raising, one way and another. That's why I told Grant Neves to overlook what little mistakes you might make."

Dave made an uneasy movement with his shoulders. They were big for a boy of twenty. He reached up to shove his battered Stetson carefully back on the mop of tawny hair.

"I'm not going to make any mistakes."

Callahan's chair squawked again as he leaned back to light up. "As one of the biggest shippers in Emmetsville, Dave, I swing a lot of weight. It would pay you to see things my way. Take Grant Neves' daughter. Everybody's known you and Maretta have wanted to get married for a long time. You couldn't support her before. Now you've got the chance. Your whole future depends on this job. Fumble it, and you'll have a helluva time getting on as brand inspector anywhere else. Then what? A thirty-and-found rider couldn't support Maretta."

The weather-wrinkles springing up about Dave's squinted eyes lent his face an older look. "Just what are you saying, Callahan?"

Callahan breathed smoke from his nose, gazed through the twin gray banners at Shavalda. "Kid doesn't understand what I'm saying."



Dave came wheeling around to meet the bang of boots from the corner of the alley. . . .

A stubborn shape entered Dave's mouth. "Maybe I do understand. Maybe that's why I'm not going to make any of the mistakes you're talking about."

Callahan removed his cigar. "You wouldn't have got this job if Sam Wells hadn't been killed in the pens last month. Sam was a real good inspector. He never made any mistakes either."

"Well," Shavalda said. "Maybe just one."

"Yes." Callahan studied his cigar with pursed lips. "Maybe one."

"Ain't you both tougher than a basket of snakes," Dave said. Shavalda's boots

made a harsh scrape on the floor. Dave wheeled towards him. "Go ahead," he said. "I always thought that smile would wipe off easy."

"Slack off, Smiley," Callahan said. It stopped Shavalda, with the weight of his body inclined towards Dave. Callahan rolled the cigar between his fingers, eyes on its slim length. "I'm sorry you're so stubborn, Dave. You would have made a good brand inspector."

OUT in the main street of Emmetsville, a line of Skew Bar cows and their calves were being driven into the alley be-

hind Cass Hite's butcher shop. It was a custom of the town. Every drover who brought in a road herd of steers also included a cut of cows and calves for the butcher shops. Sometimes only the calves were butchered for their veal, but it was a state law that their mammas had to be along. A brindle cow with a full bag was walking alone near the end, and Dave Ramsey stopped on the sidewalk, hunting in vain for her calf.

He was about to take the reins of his horse off the hitchrack when he caught sight of Maretta Neves coming towards him from across the street. A hot gust of spring wind whipped her green riding-skirt about her legs, and ruffled at her dark hair.

"I looked for you at the pens," she said. "How are things going?"

He was suddenly shy and boyish before her lithe beauty. "Everything loaded but that bunch of Skew Bar steers. I been wondering where they came from."

"Smiley Shavalda told me Skew Bar was some new outfit way out south that put their steers in under a road brand with the Circle X cattle," Maretta said. She sobered, studying his face. "What's wrong, Dave?"

He shook his head in a puzzled way. "Callahan had me up today. He told me they wouldn't hold my mistakes against me. I got the impression I wouldn't last on the job if I didn't play along with him."

"Play along on what, Dave?"

"I don't know," he frowned. "The whole setup was funny. Why should Smiley Shavalda be in on it? He's the Circle X foreman. Does Callahan have any connections with Circle X?"

"Not that I know of," she murmured. "That was all Callahan said?"

"Just about. I told him I wouldn't make any mistakes for him or anybody else."

"And insulted him in the bargain." She

grabbed his arm. "Dave, you've gone off half-cocked again. Callahan's never been mixed up in anything shady before."

"He's been slipping lately. There's talk that Ben Williams might crowd him out if Ben took a notion."

"That isn't the point, Dave. The most influential man in town offers you his friendship and you insult him. How do you know it was crooked? Maybe it was dad who got you this job, but one word from Callahan would finish you. Nobody but a stubborn, pecky kid with a chip on his shoulder could have put such a meaning into what he said."

"So you think I'm a kid too, without enough sense to hold down a man's job."

"I didn't say that—" She broke off, tears welling up into her eyes. "You fool," she cried. "You stubborn fool!"

She turned and went down the walk so hard it shook beneath her. He watched her go, the dogged shape of his mouth fading out before a hurt expression. A stubborn fool? Why did that always come up between them? Was he really that stubborn? He shook his head helplessly and unhitched his mare and swing aboard, heading for the pens.

Passing the first one, he glanced absently at the Skew Bar steers held here. Something caught his eye, and by the time he reached the alley to Number One chute, he was leaning over the top rail, studying the brands carefully. A crew of loaders was already running the animals through the chute and into a car.

"Wirt!" shouted Dave. "I thought I told you not to load this Skew Bar stuff till I got back."

Smiley Shavalda came to the edge of the ramp, grinning down at Dave. "You were gone so long, kid, I told them to go ahead."

Dave swung off his saddle onto the ramp. "Patterson, take all these Skew Bars back out. There's something wrong with the brands."

"That'd take till nighttime, kid," Wirt Patterson said.

Dave glanced at the row of closed car doors above the chute, then turned to Shavalda. "If you've got that many loaded, you must have had these men working all the time I was gone. What are you trying to put over here, Smiley?"

"Nothing, kid—"

"Patterson," Dave said. "Unload 'em."

"Don't listen to the kid," Shavalda said. "He's just showing off his new britches."

Patterson hesitated. Dave took a step towards him. Shavalda shifted across in front of Dave, hooking the front of his ducking jacket with one hand and coming in close.

"Better get on our wagon, kid, or we'll send you back to your cradle."

Dave jerked his right arm back for a body blow. Shavalda let go Dave's shirt and dropped his guard to his belly. Dave hit him in the face with his other hand.

IT KNOCKED Shavalda back against the freight car. He crouched down against the wall with a shake of his head, grabbing for his gun. Dave was already going into him. He hit Shavalda in the belly. This time all his weight was in the blow. Shavalda doubled over. Dave gave him a rabbit punch. Shavalda hung there a moment, then sprawled flat on his face.

Before Dave could turn back to the loaders, he saw Ben Williams running towards him along the siding. The Circle X owner was a grizzled man in his fifties, hickory jacket and faded levis grey with dust.

"There's something wrong with this Skew Bar brand, Ben," Dave said. "I'm unloading them."

"I was there when the Skew Bar ramrod put them in with my Circle X road herd," said Williams. "The brand's perfectly all right. You'll hold this train here

an extra day if you unload them now, kid. My Circle X stuff will lose ten pounds apiece cramped up in those cars an extra night."

"Patterson," Dave said. "I'm still in charge here. Start unloading right now or I'm turning your name into the commission."

Patterson turned sullenly to his men. Williams glanced down at his foreman. Shavalda was just now groaning and trying to roll over. Williams raised his glance to Dave once more, and his voice trembled.

"Kid, you're making a helluva mistake."

It didn't take long for word of something like this to spread, and the townspeople soon began to gather. A tall, craggy-faced man on a big bay forced his way through the knot of men in the alley. He bit at each word as if bearing it personal enmity.

"What kind of bobble you pulling here, Dave?"

Dave stood stiffly against a cattle car. "These brands are too fresh for three-year-olds, Sheriff."

Grant Neves came through the crowd on his dappled gray now. He was Maretta's father, the chairman of the Sanitary Commission, a short man tending to pudginess in his mauve fustian.

"I'd be inclined to take the boy's word," he told Sheriff Dexter. "Dave's dad was one of the best inspectors in the business. He taught Dave about all he knew before he died."

"Why take his word," said Ring Callahan, "when you can go in and see for yourself?"

Dave snapped his eyes through the crowd till he saw Callahan leaning indolently against a corral post, placidly rolling a cigar between thumb and forefinger. Sheriff Dexter looked at Ben Williams. The Circle X owner called for someone to bring him a horse. In a mo-

ment a man came leading a black through, and Williams dropped off the siding into the saddle. Then Dexter and Neves and Williams went into the pen. Shavalda was on his feet by now, rubbing his neck. He moved around Dave, watching him with glittering eyes, and dropped off the siding to go to Callahan. At the same time Maretta had gained the siding from the steps farther down, and she came down to Dave.

"Somebody else would have caught the brands before this if they were fresh," she said. "Please, Dave, this'll mean your job, our marriage, everything. Let them go through."

"I know what I saw," he said.

Her lower lip began trembling. "Maybe you don't want to get married."

He stared at her soberly. "More than anything else in the world, Maretta," he said, at last.

"Not more than keeping your stubborn pride, whether you're right or wrong."

It left her in a savage burst, but before he could answer, the three men were coming out of the gate into the alley.

"Found a few that might be fresh, Dave," Grant Neves said. "But they could have been overlooked when they was long yearlin's."

"They're all fresh," Dave insisted. "You don't overlook that many in one roundup."

"Scabs is healed right thick, son," Sheriff Dexter said.

"Scab'll heal in a few weeks, Sheriff."

"You're settin' yourself up agin three men that've seen ten times as many brands as you'll ever see!" Williams stormed. "Git away from that door and let them load."

"Not as long as I'm brand inspector, Ben."

Grant Neves sounded tired. "Then you're not brand inspector any more, Dave. You're fired."

Dave Ramsey made a stooped, defeated

figure, riding through the oppressive afternoon heat of Emmetsville toward the north end of town. His mind was drained of everything save the picture of Maretta standing there on the siding with that shocked hurt in her eyes. To her, what he had done was motivated by nothing but his stubborn pride, and it had finished everything completely.

As he passed the alley running behind Cass Hite's butcher shop, he found his mind going to that Skew Bar cow without a calf. On impulse, he stopped off at the county recorder's office. Al Gering was bent over ledgers on his counter, the dim light making a pale moon of his bald pate.

"Heard about what happened at the pens, Dave," he said. "Right sorry."

"Do me a last favor, will you, Al? Tell me who the Skew Bar's registered to."

The old man squinted above his bifocals. "Seems a lawyer from Santa Fe registered the Skew Bar about two years ago. He had power of attorney and represented some Eastern stockholders."

Dave frowned. "Ever hear of hair-branding, Al?"

Gering nodded. "Hold the iron close enough to singe the hair without scarring the hide. Brand looks good for a while. But when the hair grows out again you got a hide clean as it was to start with—" he broke off. "You ain't connecting that with this Skew Bar herd?"

"Why not? Everybody knows Ben Williams has started to crowd Callahan out. Say Callahan saw it coming a couple of years ago. He sets up Skew Bar as a front. He wants to bleed Williams and line his own pocket at the same time. Smiley Shavalda is open to a proposition. As Ben Williams' foreman, he's in an ideal spot to hair-brand Williams' cattle."

"I got it, I got it," said Gering excitedly. "So Shavalda puts his own men on the branding fires. Throws a Circle X hair-brand on half the stuff. When Williams comes down to look 'em over before

turning them out to pasture, the hair-brands look as good as the real ones."

Dave nodded. "Shavalda picks them up out on the range before the hair grows out. Holds them in some badlands till the hide's clean again. Then when Callahan wants some Skew Bars, they put that brand on and ship them."

Gering shook his head. "How you going to prove this, Dave?"

Dave frowned again. "What would happen, Ben, if that Skew Bar bunch had been brought in today without a cut of cows and calves along?"

The recorder cackled. "They been bringing that veal in with the beef as long as I can remember. Last time Lem Foote forgot his calves, Grant Neves accused him of handling rustled beef."

"That's what I thought," Dave said. "They had to drive some mammas and their calves in with this cut of Skew Bar steers to avoid any chance of suspicion. One of those Skew Bar cows lost her calf, Al. Where do you suppose it'd be?"

"If those Skew Bar cattle are really Circle X, I suppose you'd find the lost calf on Ben Williams' range."

Dave touched his hat. "That's what I'm thinking too, Al. Thanks."

DAVE reached his horse at the hitchrack before he caught sight of Smiley Shavalda. The Circle X foreman was leaning indolently against

the supports of an overhang across the street, rolling himself a cigarette. There was no telling how long he had been there.

Dave left town with that at the back of his mind. The Circle X branding ground was in an elbow of Rimfire River. It took Dave the better part of the afternoon to reach it. He held Stockings in a mat of willows, watching the teams bringing their cuts of Circle X stuff in from the farther country. Dave saw Ben Williams ride in from the direction of town and stand at the rear of the chuck wagon with a cup of coffee, watching the branding. As each new bunch was brought in, Dave studied the cows and calves.

It was disappointing work. Time pressed against him. He knew Cass Hite would be butchering now. It was almost dark when Dave saw a little dogie tagging along behind a cow that already had her calf. She kept cow-kicking the dogie away, and finally it tried another mamma.

Dave cut in from the flank of the bunch, throwing the dogie before the drag or point man could reach him. He was off before Stockings stopped, walking the taut rope down to the dogie. He tugged for slack, and hog-tied the dogie when he got it. He was lifting the bawling calf up to heave it on behind his saddle as the drag man rode up, shouting angrily at him.

"That's Circle X stuff, Dave. We

(Continued on following page)

THAT the old West was not altogether as impolite as has often been inferred is proven by the following coldly courteous invitation to a gut-shoot, received by a rustling rancher from the Eastern-educated heir of his neighbor. Wrote the young man: "I shall appreciate it if you will refrain from leaving your hot branding irons about where my cattle will lie down on them!"

—Johnny Daudet.

(Continued from preceding page)

picked it all up over in Lobo Breaks."

"Glad to hear it, Marv," Dave grinned.

Ben Williams must have heard Marv's shout from the wagon. Before Dave had finished lashing the dogie onto Stockings, he came up on his dust-caked horse, choleric anger stamping itself into his face when he recognized Dave.

"This poor dogie hasn't had any milk in days, Ben," Dave said. "You can see how dough-gutted it is on grass."

"So the wolves pulled down a cow. It's still my calf."

"Where did that Skew Bar herd meet the Circle X cattle you were shipping?" Dave asked mildly.

Williams frowned intensely at him. "Over by Taos Junction."

"Marv said he found this dogie at Lobo Breaks. It couldn't have wandered there from Taos Junction in two days."

"It couldn't make Lobo Breaks in a week from the Junction," Williams said. "Marv, take it off that horse."

"No, Marv," Dave said. "Don't take it off."

The dust-filmed hand stopped as if brought up against a wall. Even in this light, the gun was visible in Dave's hand. Dave saw Williams begin to shake in his saddle.

"Watch your blood pressure, Ben. I want you all to take off your guns and throw them in the bushes."

After they had complied, Dave mounted and heeled his animal away. It would take them time to find their guns in the darkness. If they stopped to hunt, it would give him a headstart. If they didn't, the threat of his own gun would keep them at a safe distance.

The moon was a pale eye in the black pool of the night by the time he brought the laboring little horse into the outskirts of Emmetsville. A few flickering oil lamps threw a treacherous light into the main street from the facades of a half a dozen

saloons. Before he had reached the first cross street, a figure darted from the shadows. He had his gun out before he recognized Maretta.

"Dave," she said. "You can't go in. What are you up to?"

"This calf is Circle X, and it's mammy is behind Hite's butcher shop," he said. "It's proof that those Skew Bar brands are fresh, and Callahan's behind it."

"Then that must be what they're waiting for," she said. "Shavalda's been on that porch across from Hite's alley all afternoon. When Al Gering told me what you thought, and I heard you'd left town, I was afraid it was something like this."

"Then I'll go in from the next street."

"Dave, please, this last time, don't be a stubborn fool. They'll see you as soon as you hit the alley. Callahan can reach that other end from his office. They'll have you pinned between."

"I'm going, Maretta."

He pulled free, hearing the choked sob leave her. At the first cross street he cut over to the next avenue, and turned down it till he came to the other end of the alley behind the butcher shop. He could see down the length of the alley and across the main street to the dimly lit porch of the hotel. All the chairs were vacant.

Then he heard the faint clatter of boots on a sidewalk at the other end of this street. They were out of sight, around the corner, but they were coming fast toward that corner. He realized he only had another moment. He heeled Stockings into the alley and swung off. Then he whipped the lashings free of the calf's legs, heaving the animal off. The clatter of the sidewalk became louder as the man hit the corner and turned up toward the alley. At the same time, a figure was silhouetted against the hotel lights at the other end of the alley. Dave gave the dogie a slap.

"Haw, little dogie—"

The shot drowned him out. He heard the bullet slap against the wooden siding

over to his left. Shavalda was shouting. "Come on in, Callahan, we've got him!"

Dave's shot smashed the voice. He didn't even wait to see Shavalda go down. He was already wheeling to meet the bang of boots on the sidewalk at the corner of the alley. The motion slammed him back against the siding of a building. As he struck, Callahan plunged around the corner.

Dave emptied his gun into him.

There was a moment of silence, with the overpowering stench of black powder sweeping Dave. Then there was someone shouting at the far end of the alley, and people running in, with a lantern shedding its light over Shavalda. He was sitting against the building with pain squinting his eyes shut, holding a bloody side. Ben Williams pulled a lathered horse in through the men on foot, staring blankly at Shavalda. Sheriff Dexter hooked a lantern from somebody and came on down to where Callahan lay, looking down at his dead body. Williams rode down after him but stopped to stare into the corral behind Hite's butcher shop. The Skew Bar cow had come tight against the fence

so the dogie could reach through for its dinner.

"Dave," Williams said. "I still say that's my Circle X calf. It couldn't be Skew Bar."

The sheriff squinted up at Williams. "A calf knows its own mammy, Ben. That must make the cow Circle X too. And if that's so, all those Skew Bar steers we loaded today are really Circle X."

Dave nodded. "That's the first brand they wore. Only it was a hair-brand, put there by Shavalda. When it wore off, he slapped the Skew Bar on for Callahan. If this cow hadn't lost her calf in Lobo Breaks, they might have got away with it."

"Not with an inspector like you on the job," said Grant Neves. "What do you say, Maretta?"

"What I have to say will take a long time, Dad, if he wants to hear it."

Dave was suddenly shy and youthful. "I'll be listening, as long as you want to talk."

"I guess that settles it," Neves grinned. "And the next time you tell us to unload some cattle, Inspector, we'll unload!"



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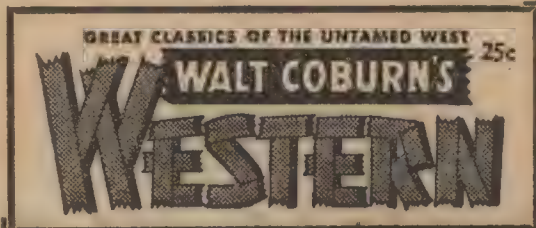
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GLASS, A RUGGED FRONTIERSMAN, JOINED A PARTY OF TRAPPERS BOUND UP THE MISSOURI FOR THE YELLOWSTONE IN SEPT. 1823. PROCEEDING ON UP THE GRAND, THEY WERE ABOUT 100 MILES BEYOND FT. KIOWA WHEN GLASS, SCOUTING AHEAD, CAME SUDDENLY UPON THE MOST DANGEROUS CREATURE ON THE CONTINENT--A GIANT GRIZZLY WITH HER CUBS.

BEFORE HE COULD RAISE HIS GUN, THE BEAR FLATTENED HIM WITH A SWEEP OF HER PAW, AND BEGAN TEARING FLESH FROM HIS BODY AND TOSSING IT TO HER CUBS. ATTRACTED BY HIS CRIES, HIS COMPANIONS DROVE HER OFF.

ANDREW HENRY, HEAD OF THE PARTY, DETAILED TWO TRAPPERS TO WAIT AND BURY THE TERRIBLY MAULED AND OBVIOUSLY DYING MAN. BUT FOR 5 DAYS HE REFUSED TO DIE. SO THEY STRIPPED HIM OF EVERYTHING BUT HIS CLOTHES AND HURRIED ON.

GLASS CAME TO TO FIND HIMSELF ALONE, AND A GREAT RAGE FILLED HIM. HE WOULD LIVE, IF ONLY FOR REVENGE. HE COULDN'T WALK, SO HE CRAWLED. HE SUBSISTED ON BERRIES. FINALLY, ABOUT DONE IN, HE DROVE COYOTES FROM A FRESH-KILLED BUFFALO CALF AND ATE HIS FILL--RAW. CARRYING AS MUCH MEAT AS HE COULD, HE STUMBLED ON AND SOMEHOW MANAGED TO REACH FORT KIOWA.

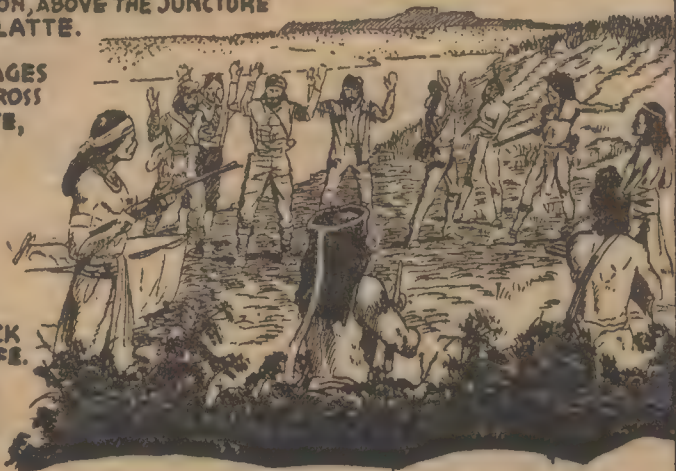


OLD WEST



THERE, CONSUMED BY HIS RAGE, HE IMMEDIATELY JOINED ANOTHER PARTY ENROUTE TO THE YELLOWSTONE. A FEW DAYS' JOURNEY UP THE MISSOURI THEY WERE ATTACKED BY INDIANS. ONLY GLASS ESCAPED. HE PLODDED STUBBORNLY ON AND A MONTH LATER REACHED THE YELLOWSTONE--TO FIND HIS QUARRY HAD ALREADY STARTED BACK TO FORT ATKINSON, ABOVE THE JUNCTURE OF THE MISSOURI AND THE PLATTE.

WITH 4 MEN BEARING MESSAGES FOR THE FORT, HE PUSHED ACROSS COUNTRY TO THE NORTH PLATTE, AND IN BOATS OF BUFFALO SKIN PROCEEDED DOWN RIVER UNTIL THEY WERE CAPTURED BY INDIANS WHO HAD JUST SUFFERED HEAVILY IN A BATTLE WITH THE HENRY PARTY AHEAD.



GLASS GOT AWAY AND STRUCK OUT, ARMED ONLY WITH A KNIFE. NEWBORN BUFFALO CALVES WERE ABOUT HIS ONLY FOOD AND THE GOING WAS TOUGH. IN JUNE HE REACHED THE FORT AND CAUGHT UP WITH HIS QUARRY AT LAST. BUT THE HARDSHIPS OF HIS 9-MONTH MANHUNT HAD QUENCHED THE BURNING RAGE IN HIS HEART-- AND THE HAND HE HELD OUT TO THEM WAS EXTENDED IN FORGIVENESS.



You've got plenty of friends when you fight and win, Marshal Ed Bassett found—but lose, and you die alone!



The JP crew rode up to Bassett's office and confronted him. . . .

DEAD MAN'S STAR

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

IT WAS nearly dark by six o'clock, but this was Saturday night and the windows of Tularosa's business places were aglow with lamplight while their doors stood wide open in invitation to trade. Ranch and farm rigs lined a goodly portion of Wyoming Street, and every hitchrack had its quota of saddle horses.

Shopping was only a part of it, however. A Saturday evening visit to town was a matter of men meeting friends and neigh-

bors, having a drink or two, and talking crops and cattle and politics. It was a matter of peppermint sticks, maybe a haircut, and a chance to see the sights for the kids. It was a matter of womenfolks gossiping, discussing new fashions, comparing new babies. It was a matter of cowhands painting the town a pale shade of red. A weekly visit to town was a holiday that never palled.

Marshal Ed Bassett, lounging in the

doorway of the plank shack that was his office, was a part of it and yet apart from it. He saw and felt and liked the quiet excitement of the night. But so long as it remained an orderly excitement, it no more concerned him than if he were a thousand miles from Tularosa.

He was a tall lean man of thirty-five. He had a dark, angular but not unhandsome face, and an aloof manner, the characteristic of all good peace officers, that kept him from having friends even among a friendly people. He had a reputation too, that of a fighting marshal, won in a dozen other, wilder towns than Tularosa. And it was this reputation that, during his nine months here, had kept this town quiet and safe.

But a reputation seemed made to be challenged.

Tonight, this Saturday night, Jake Pardee was due in town.

That was what tonight meant for Marshal Ed Bassett: a matter of a showdown with wild, proud, boot-tough Texas Jake Pardee. Ed Bassett suddenly stirred restlessly. He tossed his cigarette butt into the street, and, like many a lawman before him, muttered, "Damn those rowdy Texans!"

A bunch of riders came loping noisily into town, and Bassett stiffened. He relaxed at once, for they were the X Bar X hands and not Jake Pardee's JP crowd. The X Bar X punchers knew where to draw the line, as did all the other crews of the neighboring spreads. Only the JP crew—Texans all, and new to Wyoming—blended troublemaking with their fun.

The X Bar X riders, seven strong, raced along Wyoming Street to its far end, wheeling by the station, galloping back then as far as O'Leary's Saloon. They dismounted with loud talk, filed in through the batwings. Another bunch of riders hit the plank bridge over Sarbo Creek west of town, lifting a noisy clatter. Ed Bassett tensed again, sure that it was Pardee's

crowd coming in now, ready for trouble.

There were nine in the bunch and they came in fast but without sounding off their usual Texas yells. They figured that Tularosa was theirs on Saturday nights, but Marshal Ed Bassett stood between them and their actually taking the town apart. They hated him for that, and Ed Bassett knew they hated him. He no longer lounged, but stood flatfooted and erect in his office doorway. The nine reined in before the plank shack, in a line. They ranged from a smooth-cheeked kid to an oldster with a time-eroded face. Tough men, and proud. Four of them had seen the inside of Tularosa's stone lockup, and two of them had felt the weight of Ed Bassett's fists.

One said, "Bassett, the boss said to tell you, if you were still fool enough to be here in town, that he's coming in at nine o'clock sharp."

Bassett said, "Thanks for the warning, Texas."

The JP rider spat in a gesture of contempt. "You, friend, had better make yourself scarce—*pronto* and for good," he growled. "Jake Pardee told you this town's not big enough for you and him."

"Yeah," said Bassett. "Jake told it scary."

He watched them go on, to the Wyoming House, a saloon directly opposite O'Leary's. An uneasy frown gathered on his face. Jake Pardee had made his talk a week ago, and now he had to back it up. It was senseless, but Pardee had his pride.

The trouble had its origin in a small thing. Three Saturdays back a JP cowboy had gotten drunk and shot up the town. He'd busted windows and scared a lot of people before Bassett caught up with him. He'd kicked up a fuss when Bassett arrested him, and later three other JP hands had come to demand that the marshal release their fellow rider from the lockup. Bassett had been forced to turn,

them away with a shotgun. Two Saturdays back three JP riders had started to do some window-shooting. It had been merely a gesture of defiance, but Bassett had taken all three of them in a hurry. He'd had to gun-whip two of them when they resisted arrest. He'd locked them up until Monday morning, then had taken them before Milton Glennon, the justice of the peace, and Milt had slapped them with fines and costs.

Last Saturday night Jake Pardee had come to town with his crew. The rancher had looked up Ed Bassett first thing, and told him, "My outfit helps keep this town going, badge-toter, by spending money here. My riders are free men, and they rate some sport."

Pardee had paused, waiting for Bassett to argue.

Bassett had merely said, "Say the whole of what's on your mind, Pardee."

Jake Pardee had made it plain. "Tonight my boys are going to behave like kids in Sunday School. Next Saturday night they're really going to cut loose their wolf. They're really going to howl. I'm going to be here to see that nobody interferes with them, Bassett."

"That sounds like fight talk, Pardee."

"It's just what it sounds like, badge-toter."

"I'll be here to see if it is."

"Don't be," Jake Pardee had said. "This town ain't big enough for both you and me."

REMEMBERING that, Ed Bassett frowned with troubled thought. Milt Glennon came along the plank walk, a cocky little man of fifty-five. Besides being justice of the peace, Milt was an agent for a variety of supply houses; he would take orders for windmills, poultry, books, magazines, cure-all remedies, and a wide range of articles. Ed Bassett had come close to being friends with Milt Glennon.

The little man said, "Pardee didn't come along, eh?"

"He'll be here," Bassett replied. "He's given me a respite—until nine o'clock."

"Want me to round up some of the boys to side you, Ed?"

"No. This is between Pardee and me."

"Well," said Glennon, starting on, "I'll be here at nine."

Bassett smiled over that, and rolled a fresh smoke. The cigarette done, he stepped down from the doorway and started his customary rounds. He walked along Wyoming Street to Second, turned north along Second. Here were no business places, but twin facing rows of houses. Lace curtains hung at lamplighted windows, and Bassett had an occasional glimpse of a pleasant room. In one house a baby cried lustily, but with a certain music. From a suddenly opened door, a woman called, "Tommy! Tommy Givens, come in for your supper!" Passing another house, Bassett heard a piano being played. This was the real Tularosa, the real heart of it, and because of this pleasant street Ed Bassett like Tularosa more than any town he'd known.

It occurred to him suddenly that he had never once set foot inside of these better residences, and that he wasn't ever likely to do so. He kept this street safe for Tularosa's more prosperous citizens—the merchants, the banker, the owner of the lumberyard, the superintendent of the local freighting firm. But he was only their hired hand.

Bassett walked to the end of the street, then turned back. He recrossed Wyoming and walked down South Second. Here again were residences, but houses of less imposing fronts and more cheerless interiors. Here lived the workers and their families; the store clerks, the teamsters, a few railroad workers, a bartender, a carpenter. Ed Bassett was more welcome in this part of Second Street, but he had never visited in any of their homes either.

It was odd that he thought of that tonight, for the first time, and, being a man who always needed to know motives, he puzzled over the turn his mind was taking.

It was because of the threat of Jake Pardee that he was looking inward tonight, for, despite his reputation, there was no certainty that Ed Bassett could come out best in a gunfight with the Texan. And Pardee, being what he was, knew of only one way to settle a dispute—with a gun.

Doc Mercer's house was on South Second, just below Wyoming, and Bassett gave its lamplighted windows a swift, searching glance.

It was not for a glimpse of Doc Mercer that Bassett looked at the house. The doctor had a daughter, and more than any woman Ed Bassett had ever known, Louise Mercer caused him to wish he was something other than a man with a star and a gun. She was no slip of a girl to make a man lose his head; Louise was about twenty-eight, and Bassett knew that some folks considered her an old maid. She taught at Tularosa's school, and often she served in an emergency as a nurse. She was not a beauty, but to Ed Bassett's eyes Louise was the most attractive of women. She had a quiet gaiety, a wealth of kindness. And Bassett knew that in one way, Louise and he had something in common. Behind her smile he saw the same loneliness he himself so often felt. Often she came to the door to speak to him for a minute or two, as he patrolled the street, but tonight she didn't appear.

Beyond the end of the street, three hundred yards along the south road, a small house stood alone. Tonight Bassett walked out to this house, knocked on its door. Jim Wyatt lived here, and Jim was a brakeman on the railroad. Jim was working now, out on the road, and he'd asked Bassett to stop by here every hour or so tonight. The Wyatts' baby, their first, was just about due.

The nester girl, about fourteen and none too capable, whom Jim had hired to stay with his wife, opened the door. She looked blankly at the marshal, and he said, "Don't wait too long to get the doctor."

The girl looked a little frightened.

Bassett said, "When it's time for the doctor, put a lighted lamp in that side window. I'll see it there and fetch Doc Mercer."

The girl showed relief. "All right," she said.

Bassett circled the town, came to the railroad station at the extreme east end of Wyoming Street. There was a freight shed beyond, and stockpens. The station was dark. No trains passed through Tularosa until early morning. But Bassett heard a sound from the platform. It stopped him, then drew him to the little building.

A girl sat on the bench at the front of the station, a traveling bag at her feet. She was crying. She was about eighteen, neatly but poorly dressed. She gave a start upon sensing Bassett's presence, and tried to wipe away her tears.

"What's the trouble?" Bassett asked gently.

He remembered this girl. She had arrived on the afternoon train, and he'd seen her several times along Wyoming Street. He had noticed her coming from the Welcome Cafe and, later entering the post office. She had difficulty finding courage enough to tell him what was wrong.

"I don't wear this badge just to scare folks into obeying the law," Bassett said encouragingly. "Lots of times I help people."

"You—you can't help me."

"Don't be too sure. Where you from?"

"St. Louis."

"What's your name?"

"Helen Ward," the girl said huskily, "And I—I'm scared!"

Bassett said, "Nothing to be scared of. Look, Helen; you've got trouble, and I've got trouble. Plenty of people—most people, I guess—have some trouble." He hazarded a guess about her. "You left St. Louis to join somebody here—a man. You had just enough money to get you to Tularosa, and now, because the man didn't meet you, you think you're stranded in a strange and unfriendly place."

"Tom wrote that he would meet me," Helen said, and began to cry softly again. "He even sent me my train fare. And now—"

"You let him know you were arriving today?"

"I wrote him a letter two days before I left St. Louis."

"Could be that he didn't get your letter," Bassett said. "It may have gone astray in the mail."

She shook her head. "He's not even in Tularosa," she said. "I asked so many people. Nobody here even heard of Tom Hadley!"

Bassett hadn't heard that name before, either. He said, "Tell me what Tom looks like and what sort of jobs he worked at back in St. Louis. Maybe I can find him in time for you to have your wedding tomorrow."

She falteringly described Tom Hadley: he was tall, he was handsome, he was twenty-four. He was a mining engineer, only a year out of school. He had wanted her to meet him at Tularosa to be married. The description was vague, but Bassett thought he knew the man, his whereabouts, and why the youth hadn't met her. There was a new mining camp up in the Trade Hills, about twelve miles north of Tularosa, and it had no post office. In fact, the camp hadn't even a name. Tom Hadley would receive his mail here in town, when he came in from the camp, and no doubt he hadn't been able to come to town during the past few days. Bassett had been up to the camp, and he'd

talked to a lanky six-footer of about twenty-four whom the other men in the camp called Slim. This Slim was a homely sort, but a girl in love with him might consider him handsome.

"Blonde hair, blue eyes, freckles," Bassett said.

"Yes!" the girl cried, jumping up. "You know him? Oh, do you?"

Bassett seldom smiled, but did so now. He picked up her traveling bag and said, "I've a hunch. Probably the only man in Tularosa who heard your sweetheart's name is the postmaster and—"

"He said that he didn't know Tom."

"Old Will Payson is deaf. He didn't understand you, I'll bet."

"Oh, Sheriff—"

"Marshal," Bassett corrected her. "Come along. I'll get you a room at the hotel, and if Tom isn't in town by morning, we'll hire a rig and go to him."

She took Bassett's arm, as happy now as she had been sad a few minutes ago. Bassett was pleased with himself, walking with her to the Tularosa Hotel, but then he thought, *Maybe you won't see tomorrow morning, bucko.* He'd remembered his coming showdown with Jake Pardee.

IT WAS seven o'clock. Tularosa was busy but orderly, and even the JP hands in the Wyoming House were behaving themselves. Ed Bassett had left the girl eating supper at the Welcome Cafe, after getting her a room for the night, and now he strolled west along Wyoming Street.

He heard a voice call, "Hey, Marshal!"

Peering about he saw Dan Rigby, the hostler at Kane's Livery Stable, motioning for him. Bassett quickened his stride, asked, "What's wrong, Dan?" Dan Rigby was one of the town ne'er-do-wells, a lank-faced man with a hangdog look, seedy clothes, a constant aroma of the stable and of rotgut whiskey. He was ex-

"tited now. He grabbed at Bassett's arm. "Marshal, something's happened to Tobe Belans!"

"An accident?"

"He just keeled over, Marshal!" Rigby said wildly. "We were just talking and having a wee drink, and Tobe keeled over. I never laid hand on him, Marshal. I swear it. Tobe and me—we were friends!"

He drew Bassett into the barn, and there was a light in the harness room. Old Tobe Belans, even more of a ne'er-do-well than the hostler, lay sprawled on the floor. He was a ragged scarecrow with a matted gray beard. He looked dead, but Bassett found that he was still breathing shallowly.

"Go get Doc Mercer, Dan."

"He ain't dead?"

"Not yet. But step lively, man!"

Dan Rigby darted away, moving faster than he had in years. Bassett saw a couple of empty whiskey bottles; the two old cronies had been drinking heavily. Bassett found an empty feed sack. He folded it, placed it beneath the stricken man's head as a pillow. Tobe suddenly heaved a great sigh and opened his eyes.

"Dan?" he muttered. "That you, partner?"

"Marshal Bassett, Tobe. Dan's gone for Doc Mercer."

"I'm dying, Marshal?"

"You're plenty sick, friend."

"I feel mighty cold, Marshal."

Bassett saw a horse blanket. He covered the man with it. "That better?" he asked. He knew Doc Mercer wouldn't arrive in time.

Tobe Belans whispered, "Better. I'll just sleep until the doc comes." He closed his eyes, and his breathing grew more and more shallow until he wasn't breathing at all.

Bassett was still kneeling there when Dan Rigby came with the gray-mustached, bright-eyed doctor. He said, "Sorry, Doc.

I shouldn't have bothered you." He drew the horse blanket up over the dead man's face after Doc Mercer made sure, then rose and put a friendly hand on Rigby's skinny shoulder. "I'll tell the undertaker," he said, and went out.

He went on to his office, looked at his watch. It was a quarter past eight. Forty-five minutes to go.

Forty-five minutes to live, maybe.

He rolled and lighted a cigarette, seated himself, put his boots on the desk. His long, powerful body relaxed, but his mind worried itself like a puppy trying to catch its tail. Tonight was little different from any night for any lawman with a town to watch over. The people of Tularosa, if they thought of him at all, took it for granted that their marshal merely used his fists and his gun to keep the rowdy element quiet. Yet he was forever concerning himself, more than any other man, with the life of the town.

Tonight he was concerning himself with the birth of a child, and he had knelt beside a dying man. He had welcomed a frightened stranger. None of this involved the use of violence and of the authority that went with a law badge. Only the people to whom he lent a helping hand knew this side of his job, and they would not remember it.

They would remember, the whole town would remember, what happened at nine o'clock tonight, however, and it would always be said, "Marshal Ed Bassett? Sure, I remember when he killed Texas Jake Pardee." Or, "Yes, I remember when he was killed by Texas Jake Pardee."

Bassett suddenly realized that, had he come to Tularosa to become a rancher or even a store clerk, he would have become a real part of the town. He would have been accepted, and he no longer would have known loneliness. He would have had the right to court Louise Mercer, and perhaps he would have been able to make her Mrs. Edward Bassett.

The marshal toyed with that thought, liking it. Louise alone of the women he had known was the one with whom he wanted to share his life. He had a few thousand dollars, saved over a dozen years, and that amount would probably get him a heavily mortgaged ranch—but a mortgage would not daunt Ed Bassett in the slightest degree. Len Harper wanted to sell his cow outfit up on Broken Yoke Creek, and the bank might help along an ambitious man with some money of his own.

Too late, Bassett told himself.

Louise wouldn't want to be courted by a man who had killed another in this town, even though it were in the line of duty. The bank wouldn't be inclined to give financial backing to such a man. Law-badger or no, a killer was a killer.

Bassett frowned, his face turning bleak.

But for his pride and his wildness, Jake Pardee was a good man. An asset to any range. In time, he would tame his wild nature and no longer consider the peace something to be shattered by a bunch of rowdy cowhands.

Bassett didn't want to kill Texas Jake Pardee any more than he wanted Pardee to kill him.

At twenty-five minutes past eight, Bassett left his office and walked to Second Street and south along it. At the end of the street, he saw the lamp burning in the side window of Jim Wyatt's house three hundred yards away. He pivoted, strode rapidly to Doc Mercer's house. He opened the door as he knocked, and said, "Doc?"

Doc Mercer answered from his office, "Yes, Marshal?"

"You're needed at Jim Wyatt's house."

"Thanks, Ed."

The doctor came into the hall, carrying his bag, hurrying. Bassett asked, "Anything I can do out there?"

Doc Mercer shook his head, smiled, said, "Hardly," and bustled out.

Louise came down the stairs, hurrying

too, and stopped Bassett as he turned to follow the doctor from the house. "Ed," Louise said, "Ed, I'd like to talk to you."

He removed his hat, faced her with one of his rare smiles. She was a tall woman, mature of figure, plainly dressed. She was darkly blonde, and her features were good. There was a trace of beauty in her face, but it was dimmed by her restrained personality. Louise was shy, Ed Bassett suddenly realized. But he saw a new determination in her manner now.

"Yes, Louise?" he said.

"Ed, I've heard some talk about trouble between you and Jake Pardee."

"It's true. Pardee's coming in at nine o'clock for a showdown."

"Must it be, Ed?"

"Unless I let Pardee's crew shoot up Tularosa every time they come to town," Bassett told her. "No, that's not all of it. It must be unless I leave Tularosa before nine. Pardee gave me an ultimatum."

Louise looked grave, unhappy. "It's so foolish," she said. "There's no need for such a thing."

"Pardee's a proud man, Louise. I stepped on his pride."

"He has a wife and two children. I met them."

"A man with a family shouldn't hunt trouble."

"And he might kill you, Ed," Louise said shakenly.

That touched Ed Bassett. He smiled faintly. "I didn't know anybody in Tularosa ever considered such a thing. A marshal is paid to take such a risk." Suddenly, perhaps because of the showdown to come, he wanted to let this woman know how he felt about her. "I too am proud," he said, "and I can't run from Pardee—or any man. But I wish tonight that I was anything but a lawman. Louise, I wish—"

"Ed, I think I know," Louise said, when he couldn't go on. "Ed, it's not too

late. Don't be a marshal tonight. Take off your badge—resign.”

“Pardee would still want his showdown,” Bassett said. “He’s said that. Tularosa isn’t big enough for the two of us. He’ll force me to meet him. If I refuse to draw my gun, he’ll beat me down with his gunbarrel and force me to leave town even though I have to crawl. I know Pardee’s kind. I’ll have to defend myself, Louise. And if it’s Pardee who dies and I who live, I suppose you will never forget.”

“I’d always remember his wife and children, Ed.”

“And remembering would keep you from being happy with me?”

“Yes, Ed,” Louise said tonelessly. “Even though I don’t want it to be that way.”

Bassett nodded.

He turned to the door. Louise cried, “Ed!” But he went out, and walked hurriedly away from the house.

IT WAS five minutes of nine by Ed Bassett’s watch. He sat in his office, listening to the ranch and farm rigs starting out for home. Only the cowhands and ranchers without families would remain in Tularosa until late. Little Milt Glennon, the justice of the peace and agent for the supply companies, came bustling in as he had promised. Glennon said, “A couple minutes yet, Marshal.”

Bassett nodded, removed his feet from the desk, tossed his cigarette into the spittoon. He said, “Milt, keep out of it.”

“All right, Ed. But only if Pardee’s riders keep out it.”

“They will.”

“You never know.”

“I know Jake Pardee,” Bassett said flatly.

He went to the door, looked along the street. It was clearing of people, and shortly the business places would darken.

Decent of Pardee. The man was delaying the showdown until there was little danger of bystanders getting in the way of flying lead. Bassett looked west out Wyoming Street, toward the creek bridge. Pardee should arrive from the west. Bassett saw no rider in that direction.

He looked at his watch.

Three minutes to go.

A rider came in from the east, past the station. Bassett looked that way, with a sense of shock, knowing that it was Pardee. The rider came on until he reached the Wyoming House, dismounted there, entered the saloon. Pardee had time enough for a drink.

Bassett’s palms were clammy. He wiped them on his shirt.

He turned from the doorway, closed the door, said, “Milt, he’s here.” He debated a brief moment, then said, “Milt, take out your watch. In exactly—” he looked at his own watch—“two and a half minutes, I’d like you to darken this office.”

Glennon looked surprised, but nodded. “All right, Ed.”

Bassett went to the back door, let himself out. The dark bulk of the stone-walled lockup was beyond, but he turned along the rear of the buildings east along Wyoming Street. He came to the dark, narrow alleyway between the hotel and Parson’s general store, and entered it. He moved silently toward the street. His heart was pounding.

At the mouth of the alleyway, Bassett pressed against the side wall of the store building and was hidden by a deep shadow. He could see the swinging doors of the Wyoming House saloon on the opposite side of the street, but three buildings east.

A man came from the saloon, letting the batwings close behind him.

Texas Jake Pardee.

Pardee peered in the direction of Bassett’s shack-office, then came out into the center of the street. Other men crowded the saloon doorway and its window, but

none followed Pardee outside. The Texan was a stocky man. He moved with a swagger, arrogant, sure of himself. He kept his right hand close to the butt of his low-slung gun. Pardee took measured steps along the street, his gaze never wavering from the door of Bassett's office. When opposite the marshal's position, though unaware of it, Pardee halted as though puzzled. It was evident that he had a moment's doubt. The showdown wasn't working out.

He took several more steps, then shouted, "Bassett! Come out, Bassett! I know you're in there! I saw you put out the light!" He waited a moment, then yelled angrily, "Dammit, Bassett! Come out! You hear me, Bassett?"

A homeward-bound farm wagon came rattling along the street, and Pardee was forced to step aside for it. As it passed, Bassett slipped from the alleyway and moved along with the rig until it was close to where Pardee stood. Then he ran around the rear of the wagon, lunging at the Texan.

A man bellowed from the Wyoming House doorway, "Watch it, Jake! Watch it!"

Pardee swung around, grabbing for his gun.

But Bassett was too close. He dived at Pardee's legs. He upset the Texan, spilled him onto his back jarringly. He leapt up, dropped down on the man, wrenched the gun from his hand, flung it from him. Pardee was dazed, and his struggling was inadequate. Bassett straddled him, pinned him down. He whipped out his gun and let Pardee look down the muzzle of it. Pardee's board face went slack, and even in the darkness Bassett could see fear come into the Texan's eyes.

Pardee gasped, "So that's the kind of a gunfighter you are!"

His voice had an empty sound, and it was evident that Texas Jake Pardee believed that he was facing certain death.

He was so sure of it that in this worst moment of his life, Pardee ceased struggling.

"Pardee, listen to me," Bassett said. "I played it like a sneak because I don't want to kill you."

"You what?" Pardee gasped.

"And because," Bassett added, "I don't want to risk being killed."

The fear of death left Pardee, and he stared up at Bassett with amazement. Bassett holstered his gun, got to his feet, then gave Pardee a hand and helped him rise. They faced one another, Bassett uneasily and Pardee in disbelief. Along the street men were venturing from doorways.

"I don't get it," Pardee muttered.

"You've got a wife and children, Pardee."

"You—you been thinking about that?"

"Haven't you, friend?"

Pardee looked a bit sheepish, suddenly. "Yeah," he said thickly, reluctantly. "All week. Ever since I made my brag to you." A grin came slowly to his broad face. "Queer, the way a man's mouth makes a fool of him," he went on. "Marshal, I've been in a cold sweat ever since last Saturday night. I made my brag, but I'm swallowing it now—without gagging. You satisfied?"

"I never had anything against you, Pardee."

"You rode my boys with rough spurs."

"Nothing personal in it. This town likes to be quiet."

"Then my boys'll be quiet from now on," Texas Jake Pardee said. "Bassett, this calls for drinks. Come and belly up to a bar with me."

"Not now, Pardee."

"You won't drink with me?"

Pardee wasn't bristling. He was hurt. But Ed Bassett's reply eased the hurt, for the soon to be ex-marshal said, "Any other time, Pardee. Right now I'm on my way to ask a lady to marry me."

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 117)

HHEY, you city fellers and Westerners alike. Rein up a spell, 'cause we aim to test your range savvy. Below are twenty questions dealing with cowpokes and the West in general. Answer eighteen or more, and you rate in the tophand class. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. But answer fewer than fourteen and you're definitely in the pilgrim group. Good luck!

1. If the ranch boss referred to one of his men as "salty," would you think the latter cowpoke was a good hand or a poor hand?

2. In the language of the cowpoke, what is the meaning of the term "sea plum?"

3. According to the old time Westerner's way of thinking, what are two meanings of the term "pilgrim?"

4. True or false? A "picked brand" is a brand which has been altered by a rustler.

5. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher's expression, "on the lookout?"

6. If a Western acquaintance of yours told you he was expecting an "Oklahoma rain," what would you think he was anticipating?

7. According to the early-day Western meaning of the term, what was a "mave-ricker?"

8. If the ranch boss sent you out for a *maleta*, which one of the following items would you return with? A variety of sheep? A cowpoke from Texas? A rawhide bag?

9. What does it mean when a cowpoke says someone is "leaky-mouthed?"

10. True or false? In the range country,

the term, "layout," is sometimes used in reference to one's personal property.

11. If the ranch boss told someone to "jingle your spurs," which of the following should that person do? Hurry up? Polish his equipment? Reach for his gun?

12. True or false? "Jamoka" is a rangeland slang term used in reference to tea.

13. As the expression is used in reference to a horse, what is an "honest pitcher?"

14. What is a "home-sucker?"

15. What is a "head-and-tail string?"

16. True or false? The cowboy expression, "hard-wintered" is used in reference to a person who has recently struck it rich.

17. If a cowpoke said he had a "gal-leg," which of the following items would you think he was in possession of? A rangeland lamp? A type of spur? A variety of desert cactus?

18. True or false? A "gate horse" is a cowpoke who for some reason or other is stationed at a corral gate.

19. According to the slang meaning of the term, what is a "feed trough?"

20. What is a fence wagon?

*He could ride away from that town ruled by
the guns of hate—as a man without a name
save on a bullet—or stay to write it in blood
on—*

GALLOWS STREET

AFTER the trial, Jess Patrick came out of the Peacepipe schoolhouse, cuffed to Tom Ryan's wrist. They stopped on the top step and stood facing the mob. It seemed to Jess they could almost smell his blood.

They saw him, and right away a kind of coyote barking swelled up from the street like the first chill fingers of a norther you could feel on your cheeks. It wasn't an ordinary mob. It was different.

It was solid up front with the men from the right part of town, and they had their women. There was Guy Crawford, the banker, and Sam Lutson and next to him, the Reverend Thadeus Oakes in his stiff black clothes and white come-to-meeting collar. So it wasn't a mob of saddlebums a man could bluff. It was Peacepipe, out there against Jess, and not a one of them who hadn't loved Old Man Allen. Jess looked over their heads at the sign across the street on Hogan's saloon.

"It won't be easy on you, Jess," Tom said. "But there's not a lot I can do. Ordinarily, with a mob, I'd put a man on his honor and we'd go through 'em without these. . . ." Tom raised his left arm and Jess felt his right wrist pulled up with it. He didn't say anything. He just looked across at Hogan's sign and clamped his teeth down hard.

"Or if they were worse, Jess," Tom said. "Then we could take 'em off. But with a bunch like this, and them no more troublesome than they are, I can't do that. Not with you."

Tom didn't finish it. But then he didn't have to. Jess knew what he was saying

just as plain as if he'd written it all down and handed it over for him to cipher out. He was saying, friend or not, an honest marshal couldn't trust a man like Jess, who'd got himself sentenced to hang in the morning. Jess stretched his fingers.

"All right, Tom," he said.

Tom sighed. Then he nodded and turned toward the mob. He took a step down, but not one of them moved down there. Tom stopped.

The mob stood there, swaying a little when they breathed and looking at Jess as sharp and solid as the edge of a ripe field of wheat just at dusk. Tom stuck out his hand and waved it around and they swayed just a bit, like he'd swung a dull scythe.

"All right," Tom said evenly. "Clear a way."

He didn't do any good. Not hesitating like that, he didn't. It looked to Jess like Tom had made it worse. None of them moved, except for Sam Lutson.

Sam stepped over closer to the Reverend Oakes. He said something to him Jess couldn't hear and the Reverend opened his coat and pulled out a rolled piece of paper. He handed it to Sam and Sam stepped out in front where more of the mob could see him.

Jess tried to keep on looking at Hogan's sign, but he couldn't help watching Sam while he unrolled the paper, taking his time. And when Sam got that done, he held the paper up and slapped it. He was careful not to look where Jess could meet his eyes.

"Marshal," Sam said, pointing at the paper, "this here's a petition. We all

By JOHN H. HOLLAND

signed it to give to Judge Blackmer. So you just hold Patrick right there on the steps until the judge sees what we signed. It says we're taking Patrick off your hands. It says we're gonna hang him now."

It hit Jess again, the same thing he'd felt back inside when the judge said he'd hang. His knees went limper than a cowhand's loop, and before he thought, he looked to Tom.

But then Jess remembered Tom wasn't his friend, the way he had been on the march through Georgia in the war. Tom was marshal of Peacepipe now. And the night Old Man Allen got himself murdered, Jess had left his coat in Tom's jail. So Jess was all alone, there on the steps. And Tom went right on being like a marshal.

"There's still a law, Sam. I'm taking Jess to jail. Do what you want to with

There was an awful lot of confusion when they realized who he was. . . .



your damn petition, but right now, get out of my way."

Tom sounded more like he meant it, saying that, and Jess had his hopes for a minute that maybe the mob would break. But Sam had more to say.

"The Judge'll sign an order, Ryan. We'll get your prisoner one way or another and we'll hang him this afternoon. So just hold on a minute."

Jess didn't see any way out of that. The town had its blood up about Old Man Allen, and there'd been that string of Saturday night killings before that. They were laying them all to Jess, so he knew they'd hang him this afternoon. There wasn't any way out. But Tom jerked, and Jess saw the barrel of his .44 come up along his right side.

"Come on, Jess," Tom said and he started down the steps.

Jess went along, but he figured that right there was the end of it. He didn't think for a minute that Tom would use his gun on any of that mob. And he didn't think they'd get by. Sam was coming toward them.

But the Reverend Oakes and Crawford, the banker, reached out, one of them for each of Sam's arms, and hauled him back. Sam started to say something, but Crawford said "Quiet!" and he shut up.

Tom and Jess made it down to the bottom of the steps. They turned left and headed up the boardwalk to the jail. Tom's .44 cleared the crowd back and Jess could see they'd make it all right to the jail. But that didn't make it any easier. It only meant to Jess that he'd have that much more time in his cell to fret about that petition. And to wonder why Tom would be acting the way he was. Jess looked at Tom's back as they walked along, and he thought how it was a man could be a friend one day and just another marshal the next. Just another marshal with something to hide.

But the thing that bothered Jess was

that he couldn't figure what it was Tom had to hide. And there had to be something. Tom was the only one in the jail the night Old Man Allen was murdered. Anyway, Tom was the only one who wasn't in a cell, so it had to be him who'd taken the matchholder from Jess' coat. And it was the matchholder they were going to hang him on.

Jess had been fool enough to stand up in court and own up to the matchholder. But there wasn't anything else to do. It was his. He'd made it from a brass shotgun shell. And he'd left it in his coat. He was sure of that. Just as sure as he was that he'd left the coat in Tom's jail that night because of the heat. And they'd found the matchholder there behind the livery, six inches from Old Man Allen's nose. So that much of it was clear. They had a case against Jess and they were going to hang the other killings on him too. But the thing Jess couldn't figure was why.

Why Tom, and why Jess, of all the men around Peacepipe that Tom could hang it on. It didn't fit. Not any way Jess turned.

JESS couldn't think of any reason why Tom would want to get him hanged. He hadn't done a thing but work his spread since they'd come back from the war. And Tom wasn't the kind who'd begrudge a man any success. It would even have been more reasonable if Tom had tried to hang it on Crawford, the banker.

Or even the Reverend Oakes, if he wasn't a preacher, or maybe Sam Lutson, if everybody didn't like him the way they did, in spite of the drinking he did. So there wasn't any way to look at it, really, except to see what had happened and wonder why. Jess looked away from Tom's back and aimed his eyes at the church steeple, up the street.

It might have been the steeple. Or it

might have been thinking on how in an hour he'd be dead if they signed that petition, but whatever it was, right then the town took on more color than Jess had ever seen. And he could feel the sun.

He could feel it warm on his back and he couldn't help wondering how it'd be to be dead and not feel or hear or smell. It was pretty bad, thinking that, with the brick red and sand and pink and blue 'dobe walls there on his left. And the barber pole up the street. And the crowd on his right, all noise and color and motion. Jess shivered.

He tried to change the paths of his thinking, but it all came back to the same thing. In a while he'd be dead. So if there was going to be a moon tonight, he wouldn't see it from his cell. He wouldn't be in his cell, he'd be someplace else if they hanged him. Or even if he didn't get hanged, he'd see the moon from someplace else.

There was always the chance. Tom could forget to lock his cell and Jess could just walk out. That was wild, but it could happen. Tom could forget. Tom was human. And wilder things than that had happened. Jess felt his heart thumping wildly in his chest at the thought of escape. But feeling that brought him around.

There wasn't any sense to that kind of thinking. If he got out, Jess knew, it'd be because Tom let him out and not for any other reason. Only there wouldn't be any reason for Tom to let him out. Unless maybe, . . .

Jess stopped.

His right arm went on along with Tom. Then it almost jerked Tom off his feet.

"Jess! What the hell—"

"I want to get something straight."

Tom looked nervously over his shoulder at the mob. "Not here, Jess. Now come on!"

"What for?"

Tom jerked at the cuffs. "Jess, don't be that way. Maybe the judge won't sign

the order. Then we'll have trouble if you're not in jail. There's always that chance."

"The only chance I got," Jess said, "you got to make for me."

"All right," Tom said. "The way I see it, your only chance is jail. Now come on!"

"A real chance," Jess said. "Something smart, like me hitting you on the head and you forgetting to lock the cell. You figuring that kind of chance for me, Tom?"

Tom turned his back on Jess and jerked him on up the boardwalk. Jess shut up and went along. But then he knew. It was hard to take, coming from Tom. But Jess knew.

He knew he could quit looking for a reason why Tom would be doing this to him. There wasn't any reason. Or there could be a hundred of them. It didn't make any difference.

It could be a woman or cards or maybe Tom had just got hungry for more money. But whatever it was, it didn't change what he was doing. What did matter was what Jess could do to make sure.

He could go along with Tom, up to the jail. And then, if Tom did try to get Jess to escape, Jess would know. It'd all fit.

Tom was marshal and people don't think to look to a marshal when there's been a killing and a robbery. They look somewhere else. Somewhere like Jess. So the thing for a marshal to do if he wants to get away with a killing is to make people think a friend of his did it. Then they try the marshal's friend and start to hang him. Only they never get a chance. The marshal lets him escape.

And the friend keeps on going and he never forgets what a good friend the marshal was because he saved his life. He even makes it look bad for himself. Bad enough so that the town doesn't want him for marshal any more, and the next thing the friend hears, way off in Montana

someplace, that the marshal got fired. So the friend feels bad.

But the marshal doesn't. He's got money enough to buy himself a spread. And with his friend gone, it just happens there's a spread to be had cheap. So all of it was clear to Jess. He followed Tom's back, walking up the boardwalk past the livery and the barber shop and to the gate to the jail court. Tom stopped.

He opened the gate and pulled Jess through. Then he closed the gate and led the way through the shade of the wall, into the sunlight that smeared the wide courtyard. They crossed to the jail office on the far side. Tom opened the door and they stepped into the office.

Tom had a desk, and over to the left was the gun rack and behind that the door back to the cells. There was the one window, barred, and the sun streaming through left black strips of shadow across Tom's shirt as he stood in the center of the room. He looked sore as a stepped-on snake, but he held it in. Then he turned and walked to the gun rack. He pulled out a .44 and a belt and holster and a shotgun. He threw them across to Jess.

"Put it on," he said.

Jess did as he was told and Tom came around the desk and stood in front of him, loading the shotgun. He took his time doing that, and Jess waited him out. He had to have the whole offer from Tom before he'd know. So he waited for Tom to tell him to walk out of there, free.

Tom finished loading the shotgun and looked at Jess. He slapped him on the shoulder and tossed him the gun.

"I tied your horse out back, Jess," he said. "I couldn't forget we'd been friends, so before the trial I—"

Jess didn't hear him out. He took the shotgun from Tom's hand and went across to the desk. He sat down.

"Sudi's a good mare, Tom. I'd hate to think you lamed her on purpose just to get me caught."

That hit Tom where it hurt. Jess could see that. But Tom kept his hold on himself.

"Look, Jess. I don't know what's stuck in your craw, so I won't bicker. You're between a rock and a hard place with that bunch waving their petition under Blackmer's nose. He'll sign it. Now we got to get you out of here. I know you didn't kill Old Man Allen. You—"

"Got a match?" Jess asked.

Tom ran his hand hard across his mouth.

"Jess, what the hell's got into you?"

"I just thought you might have a match," Jess said. "I thought maybe you carry them around in a brass matchholder. I thought maybe you'd—"

Tom grabbed a handful of Jess' shirt and jerked him up off the desk. "Damn your eyes, Jess! Do like I tell you before I give you up and let 'em hang you. Now get gone!"

He swung his arm out and Jess fell back against the closed door to the cells. So Jess knew for sure. It was Tom who'd lifted his matchholder and left it there by Old Man Allen. But it didn't help any to know it.

It just made Jess bitter. It made him not give a damn one way or another and it made him want to get ornery. So he stood away from the door, opened it and went back to his cell. He couldn't think of anything better than that to make Tom nervous. Jess took his time.

H E GOT his slicker off the peg and rolled it as slow and careful as he could, stopping once to unroll it and start over. Then Jess walked out of his cell and looked at the cell across. Tom had the back door open. Jess pointed at the cell across. It was the cell Lutson had spent every Saturday night in for the past year.

"You think on it and it's funny," Jess

said. "Him out there waving that paper around and me where I am."

Tom jabbed his thumb over his shoulder toward the alley out back.

"Come on, Jess."

"Good old Sam," Jess said, like Tom wasn't even there. Tom slammed the door and walked back to Jess.

"All right," he said. "Lutson gets wild drunk on next to nothing. But he always comes along peacable to jail, and folks don't hold his drinking against him. They like him, even. But they got it in for you. Now come on or get hung."

"A cell all his own," Jess said, not looking at Tom. "It'll be real nice for him, having a place all his own. That's more than I'll have if I go. It—"

"Jess."

He said it quiet. It was like Tom had had enough fooling around. So Jess shut up. He turned and looked right down the front end of Tom's .44. Tom flicked it toward the door.

"Do like I say, Jess."

There wasn't anything else for Jess to do. Tom could either let him escape, or he could shoot him and tell them Jess had tried to escape. So Jess went along. He'd found out what he wanted to, so there wasn't any sense in staying. Jess walked past Tom to the back door.

Tom came up and opened the door and Jess walked out into the alley. Tom stood just inside the jail door until Jess made it over to Sudi.

Jess tied the slicker on and jammed the shotgun into his saddle holster. Then he untied Sudi, led her out and swung up. She hunched up once, weighing him, and then she stood while Jess looked down at Tom.

Tom still had the .44 on Jess, so Jess swung Sudi and started out the alley without saying anything. He heard Tom yell out.

"So long, Jess."

It had a faraway, sad sound to it. Jess

dug his heels into Sudi's ribs and went ahead in the saddle, grabbing her neck. He hung on tight, trying to get lower, the muscles in his back taut. Jess got the feeling he wouldn't make it to the end of the alley. Not with Tom behind him. Not with that .44 in his hand. So he hung onto Sudi's neck. And she ran like she had spiders under her blanket. They made it to the end of the alley.

Jess sat straight then and he reined Sudi to the left, north along End street. They cleared the town without anyone seeing them, but Jess let Sudi run until they were at the crown of the first of the foothills north of town. Then he reined her to a walk and they wound their way on to the next rise. Jess pulled her in.

He looked back down at the town, more with the idea of clearing his backtrail than with the idea of seeing Peacepipe one more time. But he didn't look at his backtrail. He looked down at the town.

He could see the length of the street. It was choked full of the mob, headed from the schoolhouse, down toward the jail.

Maybe it was something in the way they walked, moving slowly and powerfully down the street, like a thundercloud you see moving right into a mountain and still not stopping. Or maybe it was the idea that women didn't belong in a mob, but that he could see spots of color all through this one that he knew were women's skirts. He didn't know what it was. But looking down at them, Jess shivered.

He was glad he wasn't down there. And he didn't care then if he did keep going. He could start up another spread somewhere farther west. He could maybe be his own man again. Jess kicked Sudi on up the hill.

But it didn't seem he'd gone a hundred yards before she stopped. Jess cursed her, but then he felt his hand. It was

tight up against his shirt. He'd reined her in without knowing it. So it wasn't Sudi who'd stopped. It was Jess who'd stopped her.

Jess slapped her neck with the reins, turning her back down the hill. And he knew then it wouldn't be any good. He couldn't be his own man if he kept on running. And Tom was down there.

But Tom or not, he had a murder charged up to him, and as far as anyone knew it'd always be his if he didn't go back and face them down. And Sudi must have felt some of what Jess did.

She put her heart into getting down that hill.

She kept running right up until they got to the end of End Street, then she slowed a bit. And Jess could see she was going to bend into the alley without his telling her. He laughed to himself and touched her neck all the same. She leaned into it, turning into the alley.

She ran hard down toward the jail, and a hundred feet short of it Jess threw his weight onto his right stirrup and her rump came down and she slid to a stop just as Jess left her. He landed running, the shotgun slipping from the holster as he left.

He tightened his grip on the stock and ran the few steps to the jail door. He pounded for Tom to open up.

He pounded hard and loud, but Tom didn't come. It seemed to Jess he'd been standing there for an hour before he heard it. It was loud and buzzing, like a swarm of bees, and Jess felt his hackles rise. The mob was in the jail court.

Jess turned away from the jail door and walked over toward Lutson's cell. He had it in his mind to pull himself up by the bars and look through to see if Tom was all right, if the mob had got to him. But when he got his hands around the bars and put his weight on them, he felt them slip. That stopped him.

He backed off and looked at them,

but he couldn't see a thing. They looked as tight as the day they'd been built. But he was sure he'd felt them slip, so he went ahead again and reached up with one hand. He twisted the bar.

It turned freely in its seating and Jess gave it a shove up. It went easy as lifting your finger. It went clear up as far as Jess could reach, slipping into the top of the window. Jess dropped the bar.

He lifted another one. Then another and another until he'd tested all seven of them. They all slipped easy. So it wasn't an accident. They'd been worked loose and a man in Lutson's cell had a way in and out. Anyone in there, even Lutson, could have—

Jess backed away from the bars like they were red hot. Even Lutson. And Lutson had been in the jail, drunk, they said; the night Old Man Allen got himself murdered. So it could have been Lutson. He could have walked on around the jail while Tom was out of the jail and he could have got into Jess' coat and picked out the matchholder. So no one would have thought of Sam Lutson. Not good old Sam. Sam was in jail. And he had been every Saturday night he'd ever come to town. Jess threw down the shotgun and took a run at the wall.

He leaped up higher than before and caught the bars. He pulled himself up to where he could look through at the jail office. It was jammed full with the mob. And Sam Lutson had a gun on Tom. So Jess knew he'd thought wrong of Tom, that he had to get in to him some way. He dropped back to the ground and picked up the shotgun. He walked over to the back door and aimed the shotgun at the lock. But then he thought better of it.

He thought that it didn't make a lot of difference if the mob was in the jail or out of it, so long as they couldn't do anyone any harm. So the thing to do was lock the mob up where they'd have to

listen to him. Jess moved away from the door and over to Sudi in a jump.

He ran her down the alley to End street, then to the right and to the right again down Front street to the jail.

HE WAS in luck. The whole of the mob had crowded into the jail courtyard. So it'd be a simple thing. Jess swung down and ran over to the heavy courtyard gate. He swung it shut and he smiled as he heard the lock snap to.

He walked back to Sudi, swung up and rode her over next to the wall. Then he grabbed the shotgun and stood in the saddle. He laid the shotgun up on the top of the wall and picked a place for his hands in among the broken bits of bottle. Then he jumped up. He stood up, there on the wall, with the shotgun hooked across his left arm and he hauled out the .44 Tom had given him and let the mob know he was there.

The .44 echoed and wallowed around down among the mob, and it was almost comical the way they looked around to see where the shot had come from. They must not have known the gate was shut. There was only the silence as they looked from one to another to see who had shot. Jess laughed.

"Up here!" he yelled.

But it didn't take. It even surprised Jess to see how slow they were getting used to the idea someone was above them. But then someone saw him and yelled "Up on the wall!" and one or two of them started to rush for the wall to Jess' left without looking to see if anyone was up there. Jess laughed again.

He squeezed off another shot with the .44, just for orneryness. Then they saw him. But it was a minute before they woke up to who he was. Then one of the women screamed. Jess swung the shotgun around where it pointed down at them.

"Now be quiet!" Jess said levelly. But the look to their faces got him again and he had to laugh. A man in a red shirt inched toward the gate. Jess slipped his finger through the trigger guard.

"I wouldn't want to answer for buckshot in a crowd of women," he said soberly. "Don't anyone move!"

That made sense to them. They stood like they'd been planted down there and you could have heard an ant yawn. Jess let them stand, and he looked them over until he found Crawford, up by the office door, but still in the court. Then he got his humor back. He smiled.

"Mr. Crawford," Jess said, "when you can find the time, step inside and get Sam Lutson. No hurry, though. I'll wait where I am."

Crawford cleared his throat loud enough that everyone in the courtyard could hear. He crossed his arms and faced up to Jess.

"You're a sitting duck, Patrick. We'd just as soon pick you off a wall as hang you."

Jess smiled and shifted the shotgun around where they could see he wouldn't miss.

"You got an argument, Mr. Crawford. But I got a better one, and you brought your women into this. So go ahead. Shoot. But try to think if you ever saw a man shot that he didn't jerk. And think what the buckshot would do if there were women under it when you killed me. Then see if maybe you don't want to get Lutson out here."

Crawford nodded and turned toward the office door. But he didn't have to step inside. Lutson came out of the shadows into the sun. Crawford put a hand on his arm and pointed up to Jess. Lutson started to raise his gun, but Crawford caught his arm.

"All right," Jess said. "Now answer me some questions. And I mean answer!" He stopped a moment to let that sink in on them. Then he went on. "Mr. Craw-

ford, did Lutson put any money in the bank you might have been surprised at in the last six months?"

Crawford looked at Lutson for a minute. Then he turned to Jess.

"Not a lot," he said.

"How much did Old Man Allen get for his cattle?"

"Seven thousand dollars," Crawford said.

"So if it didn't get into your bank under Lutson's name, suppose you look in his pocket. Now!"

Lutson backed half into the shadows.

"Why that lyin' son!" he yelled. "He can't go around making—"

Crawford stepped silently up to Lutson and reached for his coat pocket. Lutson slashed out with his empty hand, knocking Crawford aside. Then Jess saw his gun coming up. And he knew Sam wouldn't miss. Jess jerked the shotgun up in the air so it wouldn't hit any of the women in the court. Then he dived sideways.

And as he fell, he saw a long pair of black sleeves come out of the shadows in the jail door and drop down past Lutson's head, pinning his arms into his body. But then there was the glass, cutting sharply into Jess' side and scratching his face and right arm. He kicked a leg, trying to roll off the wall to the street side, but one of the long, half broken bottles stopped him. So there was nothing to do but lie there. Jess lay there, feeling the warm wet spread down his cheeks where the glass had cut him. And he wondered how he'd get off the wall and away. But then he heard the shot.

It bellowed up from the closed, packed courtyard with a muffled, rumbling sound like someone had dropped a drum down a well. Then a scream and another.

Jess didn't know how long it was. There was yelling and they'd get quiet and then yell some more and then someone must have opened the gate because he heard them running around, down there on the

street side too. Then there was the wood, sticking up by his face and then Tom's head.

"Easy, Jess," he said.

And he slipped his hand under Jess' neck. He raised him by the head and then his body and slung him over his shoulder. He carried Jess down the ladder, head down where he could look out and see the mob. Only they weren't after his blood now. They were worried about it.

Then Tom was off the ladder and turning, so Jess couldn't see anything but a blurr and feel the bumps as Tom ran through the parting crowd to the office. He bent and Jess felt himself being lowered to the floor. Then there was the Reverend Oakes' long, thin face and his eyes looking down his sad nose at Jess.

Jess tried to sit up.

"Quiet, Mr. Patrick," the Reverend said.

"But Lutson—"

The Reverend coughed and looked away from Jess. Tom's voice came from back by the door to the cells.

"The Reverend did it, Jess," Tom said. "He damn near caved Lutson's head in after he started to shoot you. I guess the Reverend's the only one around with brains enough to—"

"But Lutson," Jess insisted. "Where is he?"

Tom laughed.

"He's cuffed to his bunk in his cell. I'm not taking any chances 'til I get it figured out how he could of got loose to kill Old Man Allen."

Then Jess let his head back down to the floor. And he thought on it a minute before he started to laugh. There'd be time enough to tell Tom all about the bars in Lutson's cell window. But for now it was funny to Jess. And he meant to be around where he could watch.

He'd never seen a man crawl through a jail window with a bunk cuffed to his ankle.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 107)



1. If the ranch boss referred to one of his men as "salty," this would mean the man was a good hand.

2. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, a "sea plum" is an oyster.

3. According to the old time Westerner's way of thinking, a "pilgrim" can be either a newly imported cow, or a tenderfoot. The first meaning is probably the older of the two.

4. False. A "picked brand" is a brand made by plucking out the hair of an animal so as to form the desired pattern. It is a temporary thing, of course.

5. The term, "on the lookout," means dodging the law.

6. If your Western friend told you he was anticipating an "Oklahoma rain," he would mean he was expecting a sandstorm.

7. A "mavericker" was one who hunted down and branded mavericks.

8. If the ranch boss sent you out for a *maleta*, you should return with a rawhide bag.

9. When a cowpoke calls a man "leaky-mouthed," he means the latter person talks too much.

10. True. In the range country, the term, "layout" is sometimes used in reference to one's personal property.

11. If the ranch boss told someone to "jingle your spurs" he would be urging that person to hurry up.

12. False. "Jamoka" is a rangeland term used in reference to coffee.

13. An "honest pitcher" is a horse which starts to pitch and buck immediately after a rider has mounted it. Not termed an honest pitcher is the horse which waits until its rider is off guard before it starts to buck.

14. A "home-sucker," according to the cowpoke's way of thinking, is an individual who came West to start up a farm.

15. A "head-and-tail string" is a string of mules with the halter of each mule tied to the tail of the mule just ahead. This is done to keep the animals in single file.

16. False. The term, "hard-wintered," is used in reference to the individual who is having a tough time making a go of it from the standpoint of money.

17. If a cowpoke said he had a "gal-leg," he would mean he owned a certain type of spur, a part of which resembled the leg of a girl.

18. True. A "gate horse" is a cowpoke who has been stationed at the corral gate.

19. A "feed trough" is anywhere where cowpokes eat.

20. A "fence wagon" is a wagon used to carry materials for mending fences.

RECORD

RODEO



By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letters to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

HOWDY once again, record fans! Since we saw you last, we've been spending the time over a hot phonograph, branding the best and the latest in Western music on wax. It seems as though the boom in prairie pressings, among tenderfeet as well as Westerners, is continuing unabated. As far as we're concerned, this popularity is no new thing, since we've always thought that guitar and fiddle music was outstanding. But even though the record manufacturers are just discovering the West as a fine source of American music, we won't hold their tardiness against them. More power to 'em, we say! Now let's look over the current prize crop:

RAG MOP

WHEN THEY PLAYED THAT OLD MISSOURI WALTZ

PEE WEE KING AND HIS GOLDEN
WEST COWBOYS
(RCA Victor)

This topside has been sweeping the country, and here's a Western-styled version of this catchy dance by Pee Wee King and his Golden West Cowboys, for RCA Victor. The novelty tune lends itself to

the sagebrush rhythms with good grace, and demonstrates that it is a brightly adaptable number for all types of biscuiting, including these hoedown harmonies. On the reverse side, Pee Wee waxes nostalgic with *When They Played That Old Missouri Waltz*, and his Golden Cowboys fiddle away with tender yearning for those Old Missouri days. Gene Stewart sings the chorus with touching Midwestern accents, while the three-four time swirls pleasantly along.

I'LL WALK THIS WEARY ROAD ALONE

I'M BACK TO WHERE I STARTED
TEXAS JIM ROBERTSON
(RCA Victor)

Texas Jim Robertson has a way with a song that gives it plenty of sturdy punch and genuine range atmosphere. His latest RCA Victor cutting is a perfect vehicle for Jim's sagebrush style. It's a melancholy mood Jim's in as he spins his lovelorn tale, with just the right amount of rhythmic pathos added by the Panhandle Punchers. Jim seems to be in a sad frame of mind all around on this platter, as he sings on the backing. Seems that when Jim met his

gal he was nursing a wounded ego being previously jilted and now his new lassie's given him the brush too. Plenty of Jim's deep bass on this side, with the Punchers supporting him in melodically doleful mood.

WEDDING DOLLS
LOVE AT THE COUNTY FAIR
SONS OF THE PIONEERS
 (RCA Victor)

The first side was written by Tim Spencer of the Sons of the Pioneers, is a tune which already is catching on, but the Sons now present their own authoritative version, singing with eloquent pathos and strong sincerity of a broken love. Featuring Ken Curtis on the lyrics, this plaintive ballad has a touching and warm appeal, and is delivered in the Sons' most forthright sagebrush style. The reverse side features not only the Sons but Dale Evans and Lloyd Perryman singing a perky description of *Love at the County Fair*. Full of bounce and high spirits, this romantic rustic tune showcases a powerful lot of talent in this lively account of big doings and romance at a rural hoe-down.

LONG GONE LONESOME BLUES
MY SON CALLS ANOTHER MAN
DADDY
HANK WILLIAMS AND HIS DRIFTING
COWBOYS
 (M-G-M)

The greatest Hillbilly voice of our day,—that of Hank Williams—is showcased wonderfully in this new release of two of his own songs. Both sides are laments; one blues and one a sturdy folk ballad—and both are sung with all of the sincerity, the conviction, and the dramatic sense of styling that have brought Hank to the top of his field. His first side is really the low-down blues as Hank projects it with some tricky vocal breaks and a few half-yodeled phrases. The reverse is a deeply moving ballad of a convict who has lost to another man the wife and son he left behind. The song's realistic, close-to-the-soil quality grips the listener, helping to make this one of Hank's finest recording performances to date.

TOO BIG FOR HIS BRITCHES
YODELIN' TEX
CARSON ROBISON AND HIS
PLEASANT VALLEY BOYS
 (M-G-M)

Carson Robison has long been one of the country's best loved Folk recording artists. It doesn't seem to matter whether he records ballads or blues or comedy numbers or square dances—they all come out with the same charm and polish when Carson does 'em. Somehow, though, Carson seems at his best in the homespun talkfests he occasionally sends our way. His latest is just that: one of his beside-the-mike chats, a little comic monologue about someone who's *Too Big For His Britches*. The title might lead one to thinking that there's moralizing present here, but if you're a Robison fan you know Carson is way above preaching. He talks away at his tale straight and level, except for the sly humor he injects, allowing a listener to draw his own moral conclusion. It's another honey of a Robison side! On the coupler, Carson introduces a young yodelin' lad whose career he's sponsoring. The youngster, Tex Roy, bows in impressively on a tune written by Carson especially for him.

IDA RED LIKES THE BOOGIE
A KING WITHOUT A QUEEN
BOB WILLIS AND HIS TEXAS
PLAYBOYS
 (M-G-M)

You've probably heard a great deal about that "new" style that Bob Willis turned up with not too long ago—and you've probably heard a great deal of praise lavished upon the new development, too. Well, the peak product to date of that new style is on tap for you in this new recording by Bob called *Ida Red Likes The Boogie*. It's bright, swingy, hot as Texas in August, and there's a meaner-than-mean ol' boogie beat thrown in just for good measure. Added to the fun (and fun you'll have listening to this tale of Ida Red) is a standout hot fiddle solo, an oh-so-easy vocal by Tiny Moore and some really priceless comments by the old master, Bob himself. The flip side is an excellent contrast. It features a sweet blues ballad.



Clint stopped cold as the four men converged on him. . . .

GIVE A MAN ROPE

'A grim law gave Clint Harlan the right to live, the heart to die—and 'he bullet to kill his last friend for the sake of a man he hated!

By TALMAGE POWELL

MOONLIGHT filtered through the cottonwoods beside the creek, touching man and animal. The heifer hung by the heels from the rickety pole tripod the man had built. The man moved in beside her and his knife gleamed in his hand. With a practised thrust of his wrist, he slaughtered the heifer. Warm,

red blood gushed in a torrent, like the sheen of satin in the moonlight.

The man stepped back, watching the death spasm of the beef, wiping his hands and the knife that had tasted the heifer's jugular. His weathered, gaunt young face was set in rigid lines. It was a deliberate rustle, Clint Harlan thought dis-

passionately. He was a nester and had broken the law of the range. He recognized the fact with a cold and bitter satisfaction. Kit might not like the taste of the beef, but she would eat it for her sake and the sake of the baby that was coming.

A sound in the night stiffened Harlan. A voice said coldly, "Do it—and die!"

Clint stood gray-faced as the four men converged on him from the lip of the glen. Big Ben Rister was leading three of his riders. Harlan moved as if he would protect the slaughtered beef with the shield of his own body. "How did you find me, Rister?"

"A line shack rider of mine saw you cutting that beef out at sundown. You weren't as much alone as you thought, Harlan, and we've combed the hills for you."

Ben Rister looked at the carcass of the beef. "It won't take us long to settle this. You admit that beef is mine?"

"It might be," Clint said, "but I say it's mine. I've taken more than any man ought, my spring water dirtied, my garden trampled by your cattle. Lastly, you cut my fences, and the milk cow and beef calf I owned disappeared amongst yours. I figure you owe me this beef here, Rister."

The man beside Rister stirred impatiently in his saddle. "Stop fooling with him, boss. He just admitted it's your beef. He's a rustlin' nester and that breed hangs."

"Easy, Coby," Rister restrained Coby Tarken with a gesture of his hand. Rister's face was like chiseled granite. "There may be something in what the nester says."

Rister leaned forward in his saddle. "But you've broken range law, Harlan, and any law stands as long as its breakers are punished. The beef means nothing to me. I'll pay this debt you claim I owe you, but you'll pay yours, too, for break-

ing range law. You came here unwanted, unasked, a squatter on range that's always fed my cattle. I could have driven you out with fire. Instead, you've lighted a fire of your own and I'll see to it, Harlan, that it consumes you."

Coby Tarken laughed coldly. Unnoticed, he had slipped his gun from leather. As the gun swung up, Rister's quirt cracked like a shot in the stillness. Coby's gun toppled from his paralyzed fingers and thudded to the earth.

"Nobody on the BR spread," Rister said evenly, "ever gunned an unarmed man."

"But, boss, you said—"

"You're new here, Tarken, and if you stay long there are things you'll have to learn, such as attaching no hidden meanings to my words. We stand by the law."

THE jail in Rister's Crossing sat back on the shadeless prairie from the town's main street. It was whitewashed *adobe* with a corrugated tin roof, an oven during the day. Clint sat on the edge of the hard bunk and thought of Kit. Kit loved him, had been eager to follow him to this wilderness. He had cheated her. Because of Rister, Clint had not been able to bring any of the dreams true that he and Kit had dreamed. Now she was alone in a nester's shack, and Clint's remaining dream was a nightmare hope that he might somehow live long enough to kill Big Ben Rister.

Clint's cellmate turned from the small window. His name was Ducey Frazer. Lean, sunken-chested, with nervous hands, he was jailed for the killing of a card sharp. There was a smile on his face now as he tossed a small stone up and down in his palm. "Another one," he said.

"At this rate it will only take you five years to dig out of here."

Frazer smiled. "At least I'm doing something, not sitting worrying my guts dry."

Frazer began tugging at another projecting pebble with his thin, strong fingers. "You took one cow," he said with contempt. "Now you're here because you're too damned honest. So honest you're going to get your neck cracked with a rope, Harlan, leaving a penniless widow and a starving kid, the sum total of an honest life!"

A week ago Clint would have back-handed any man across the mouth for that kind of talk. But now he sat with the blood drained from his face, a dryness in his throat, and the echoes of Frazer's words beating against the walls of his brain.

He swung up from the cot. Frazer was right. If he had really loved Kit, he'd have rustled on a scale big enough to pay, playing it smart instead of dumb and honest.

He found himself talking to Frazer, pouring out things in a way that was new and strange and bitter to him. He told Frazer of big Ben Rister's power, holdings, cattle and the money Rister kept stashed away in his house, according to cow country rumor.

The gaunt killer's beady eyes were on Harlan's face. His fingers touched Harlan's arm. "You really want to take care of that woman?"

"That's all I want."

"Then I guess you need to get out of here." Frazer sat on the edge of the cot and removed his boot. He pulled off one sock, began dropping into it the chunks of stone he had torn loose from the walls and window sill of the jail. He stood up, hefting the sap in his hand. "Your part is simple, Harlan. Double up on your cot and yell like you're dying. Make it good. And make it loud."

WHEN the round-eyed jailer at last grumblingly answered Harlan's summons, and bent over him, Harlan saw Frazer move from his place

by the window. Frazer's face was a yellow mask of wild, distorted pleasure. The rock-filled sock came down across the jailer's head. The jailer tottered, and Frazer, almost sobbing in pleasure, struck him again. He was still striking him when Clint finally succeeded in wrestling him away from the fallen jailer. Sick with disgust, Harlan watched Frazer wipe his slack mouth. A grain of sanity returned to Frazer's eyes. Frazer said, "I won't kill no precious time jawing over your interfering with the job I planned to do on the jailer. If you want out of here, it's up to you. . . ."

Just before dark the next day, Clint rode his rib-sided mare through mesquite and tangled, thorny greasewood along the edges of Dead Man's Sink. The setting sun was like a splash of blood over the western sky, like the reflection of his thoughts, Clint decided. He remembered Kit's words when he had shown up at the house. "You've a chance when you stay inside the law. But you're lost when you fight it."

The same old catchwords, the same motheaten phrases. Kit didn't understand that words could reach him no more. He had his own sweat and life energy poured into this soil and Ben Rister had taken it all. He was beaten, but in losing he would win, for he would settle the score with Rister before he packed up and moved on.

His first awareness that he was not alone came when he saw a thin haze of smoke rising from behind a mesquite thicket down the edge of the sink. Touching the old .38 thrust in the waistband of his pants, he slid from the saddle. He left the horse ground-tied and moved with the stealth of an Indian toward the smoke haze.

When he moved through a break in the thicket, he stiffened with shock and surprise. Before him, flanking a small branding fire, were two men. Ducey Frazer,

the same expression on his face as when he had slugged the jailer back in town, and Big Ben Rister, his face like oiled leather. Rister lay awkwardly, hog-tied.

Frazer stirred the coals of the fire with a branding iron, lifted the iron and spat on its cherry colored surface. The saliva sizzled.

"A little more heat for the right kind of branding," Frazer said, "unless you want to tell me now where your money is."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rister said.

"Sure you do," Frazer smiled thinly. "That jasper in jail was too damned honest to lie, especially about a thing like your money. He poured it all out to me, Rister. I know you've got money stashed away in your house."

Rister closed his eyes. There was a flicker of sadness on his face. "I was headin' for the nester Harlan's house. No matter what Harlan had done, I figured to see that his wife got milk, seeing as how there's a young 'un coming. Maybe I should have been cold steel in Harlan's gut from the beginning."

Clint saw Rister open his eyes and look up into Frazer's face as Frazer withdrew the iron from the fire and moved close to the big man. Clint felt fine sweat breaking on his forehead.

Frazer moved the iron within inches of Rister's cheek. "I've got to do this fast, Rister. So let's get it over now. Where's the money?"

Rister's face was like the ashes of the fire. He shook his head. The iron moved closer.

"Your last chance, Rister," Frazer said.

"Go to hell," Rister said thickly.

It hit Clint like a blow in the stomach, the knowledge of Rister as a man. A man who lived and would die by the things he believed in.

"Drop the iron, Frazer," Clint said.

For one frozen moment, it seemed the whole earth and sky lay in a hush like a still life painting. Then Frazer wheeled, saw Clint, and dropped to one knee, the iron dropping from his hand and the gun at his side flashing into his fingers.

The swiftness of the man threw Clint off balance. The mouth of Frazer's gun winked orange, and Clint felt the bite of the slug in his side. Then his own gun was firing with no conscious effort on his part. He saw the slugs peppering Frazer's shoulder and chest.

Then the deep hush of the mesquite rushed back into being as Frazer twisted and crumpled to the sandy earth.

Clint moved slowly forward, favoring the bullet burn on the skin of his side. His hands worried the knots loose in the rope that bound Rister.

He turned to Frazer and when he looked back at Rister the big man was standing, his eyes steady on Clint's face.

"I think Frazer will live to see the inside of the jail again. I guess I'm still playing it dumb and honest, but I want to thank you, Rister, for thinking of Kit and to warn you to stay clear until I am able to get her out of the country."

"Where will you go, Harlan?"

"I don't know." Clint whistled and his slab-sided mare came shuffling up. He mounted the animal. The expression on Rister's face held him silent as Rister came toward him.

"Sometimes," Rister said, "men are at odds because they fail to understand each other. I would hate to see you take a lovely thing like your wife away. This country could use a few pretty things like her."

Clint felt his throat tighten as Rister slowly raised his hand. He felt his palm meet that of Rister's, felt the friendly strength of the man, and the day seemed good to Clint Harlan, for tonight he could tell Kit that they were squatters no longer. Now they were called neighbors.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 53)

the mail to Carson, if they had some to be delivered.

That was in January, 1856, the first January in which mail ever had crossed the Sierras. Thompson made the ninety impassable miles without incident—except the incredible incident of doing the job at all—and turned up in Carson four days later with sixty pounds of mail on his back.

He made the return trip in three days, covering a total of one hundred eighty miles that not even an Indian had traveled before, as far as the record shows, through the snows of January, in one week. For this historic feat Thompson was paid at the rate of nothing a mile.

Winters, from then on, Thompson was the U. S. Postal system across the Sierras. They doubled and tripled his salary. Twice nothing, three times nothing . . . there got to be some talk, on both sides of the range, about a Washington appropriation for the faithful blonde giant on his homemade snowshoes. Something in the nature of a wage, perhaps.

In the meantime, Thompson—they were beginning to call him Snowshoe Thompson—made a living from his ranch during the summer.

They began to depend on him for neighborly little extras. Like furnishing local news (at his usual rate, of course) to the newspaper editors at either end of his route. It was during one of those dozen winters that Snowshoe found one James Sission marooned in a cabin in Lake Valley, starving, too far gone with frostbite to stand on his feet.

Snowshoe made a fire, left what provisions he had, and continued with the mail to Placerville. There he coaxed and shamed five men into joining him on a mercy errand into the wintry hell above, after improvising snowshoes for them like

(Continued on page 126)

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 124)

his own. They found Sission still alive, bundled him onto an improvised sled, and took him over the peak and down the other side into Carson.

Sisson's feet were doomed, required amputation. But Carson had no chloroform. The nearest chloroform was in Placerville, on the other side of the mountains. Snowshoe Thompson went for it, rushing the trip, two days over and two days back. For this service to the medical profession and to humanity, he received his usual fee.

And then came the coolies, working in the summer weather while Thompson ranched, building the railroad through the Sierras. Thompson's work was done.

Some years later, aged forty-eight, the retired giant of the Sierras figured that he had some back pay coming. He prepared a bill for the government at Washington—six thousand dollars. Five hundred per winter.

It was a modest sum, considering what the railroads had been advanced per mile for cutting through the "mountains" of desert Utah.

In the winter of 1874, backed by a petition that bore the signatures of every official in Nevada's state government, Snowshoe went personally to Washington.

Congress was cordial, and made promises. However, they had just spent a good deal of the taxpayers' money on transcontinental communications—a few million, in fact—and didn't want to be rash.

Snowshoe went home and waited. A year later, he died, still without reimbursement from his government. But they carved a pair of granite slabs into his headstone.

In a way, Congress had been right. What the man had done had no equivalent cash value—or else, it was a cash value too huge ever to be paid.

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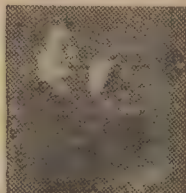
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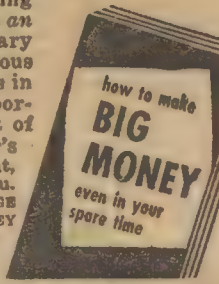
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 52)

thin' he never gave Side. My slug took him full through the face and blew it open and knocked him off his saddle into the rocks, and his flat hat sank down over the mess between his ears. Come a warm sun, and the buzzards'd remove him from the land for keeps.

Manuel didn't even stir. I could rope him later, when I had more time on my hands. I rode easy down into low country, and once when I looked back I saw them buzzards sailin' 'crosst the sun shafts, dip-pin' into the ridges near Cedar Box.

The Russel, Major's mail rig come along, pourin' dust off its wheels, and I sent out a hail and asked the grizzly on the box how soon he'd be at Four Rivers.

"Two days, bub." He didn't ask why, bein' a hand in these parts, so I requested pencil and paper, and he borrowed same from the shotgun and shoved it down to me. By that time I'd fished in my leg leather and found my bronze badge and hooked it to my shirt. The grizzly never flicked an eye.

I'm not handy with words, and a pencil don't sit right in my fingers, but I got the drift of it on paper:

The matter I was assigned to has been taken care of, and everything is all right. I will be back when I have helped Messrs. Harrison, Lindner and others recover their stock from where it is hidden at.

I gave it to the grizzly. "Will you pass this to the C.A. agent at Four Rivers?" I asked him. "I'd surely appreciate it if you do."

"The Cattlemen's Association? I shore-ly will, bub." He shook his ribbons and whupped up his teams and rolled off, and I headed back for Benteen's by way of Cedar Box, 'cause I wanted to bring Manuel in and save a trip later. What I say is, if you got work to do, finish it.

That Side, though. He was a nice feller, and I'll miss him sorely.

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 10)

sent his daughter back to Dry Creek station, to live happily ever after.

Charles Benson,
Amarillo, Texas

Next, let's hear what happened when death took over a holiday—the black fourth in Downieville:

Dear Editor:

Downieville, helltown of the California gold rush days, bears the dubious historical distinction of being the first—and perhaps the only—gold camp to have hanged a woman. Mistaking the intentions of a group of miners celebrating the Fourth of July, a nameless dancehall girl stabbed one of them to death. Although daily murders were a commonplace, feeling against her flared abruptly. Aroused miners seized her, held a travesty of a trial within the hour, banishing a couple of decent citizens who advised less hotblooded action, judged her guilty and sentenced her to hang.

The one hitch in the proceedings occurred when the hastily elected hangman suddenly found himself without the heart to slip the noose in place.

Smiling at the suddenly silent, tense crowd of spectators, the girl herself put the noose around her neck, after scaling her sombrero into the mob.

From then on everything went smoothly. From then on, too, so the story goes, not another celebrant's shout echoed in Downieville that particular Fourth of July.

Mort Reilly
Hood River, Oregon

That brings us right up against the drift fence, gents. We're clean out of space. But if you'll keep on sending in your stories of the Old West, we'll find a place for them. Until next time, then, *Adios!*
—THE EDITORS

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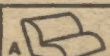
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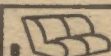
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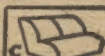
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